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THE CURATE IN CHARGE.

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BY

MRS. OLIPHANT.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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THE CURATE IN CHARGE.

CHAPTER I.

THE PARISH.

The parish of Brentburn lies in the very heart of the leafy county of Berks. It is curiously situated on the borders of the forest, which is rich as Arden on one side, and on the edge of a moorland country abounding in pines and heather on the other; so that in the course of a moderate walk the wayfarer can pass from leafy glades and luxuriant breadth of shadow, great wealthy oaks and beeches, and stately chestnuts such as

clothe Italian hill-sides, to the columned fir-trees of a Scotch wood, all aromatic with wild fragrant odours of the moor and peat-moss. On one hand, the eye and the imagination lose themselves in soft woods where Orlando might hang his verses, and heavenly Rosalind flout her lover. On the other, knee-deep in rustling heather and prickly billows of the gorse, the spectator looks over dark undulations of pines, standing up in countless regiments, each line and rank marked against the sky, and an Ossianic breeze making wild music through them. At the corner, where these two landscapes, so strangely different, approach each other most closely, stand the church and rectory of Brentburn. The church, I am sorry to say, is new spick-and-span nineteenth century Gothic, much more painfully correct than if it had been built in the fourteenth century, as it would

fain, but for its newness, make believe to be. The rectory is still less engaging than the church. It is of red brick, and the last rector, so long as he lived in it, tried hard to make his friends believe that it was of Queen Anne's time—that last distinctive age of domestic architecture; but he knew very well all the while that it was only an ugly Georgian house, built at the end of the last century. It had a carriage entrance with the ordinary round "sweep" and clump of laurels, and it was a good-sized house, and comfortable enough in a steady, ugly, respectable way. The other side, however, which looked upon a large garden older far than itself, where mossed apple-trees stood among the vegetable beds in the distant corners, and a delicious green velvet lawn, soft with immemorial turf, spread before the windows, was pleasanter than the front view. There was a large

mulberry-tree in the middle of the grass, which is as a patent of nobility to any lawn; and a few other trees were scattered about—a gnarled old thorn for one, which made the whole world sweet in its season, and an apple-tree and a cherry at the further corners, which had, of course, no business to be there. The high walls were clothed with fruit trees, a green wavy lining, to their very top—or in spring rather a mystic, wonderful drapery of white and pink which dazzled all beholders. This, I am sorry to say, at the time my story begins, was more lovely than profitable; for, indeed, so large a garden would have required two gardeners to keep it in perfect order, while all it had was the chance attentions of a boy of all work. A door cut in this living wall of blossoms led straight out to the common, which was scarcely less sweet in spring; and a little way above,

on a higher elevation, was the church surrounded by its graves. Beyond this, towards the south, towards the forest, the wealthy, warm English side, there were perhaps a dozen houses, an untidy shop, and the post-office called Little Brentburn, to distinguish it from the larger village, which was at some distance. The cottages were almost all old, but this hamlet was not pretty. Its central feature was a duck-pond, its ways were muddy, its appearance squalid. There was no squire in the parish to keep it in order, no benevolent rich proprietor, no wealthy clergyman; and this brings us at once to the inhabitants of the rectory, with whom we have most concern.

The rector had not resided in the parish for a long time—between fifteen and twenty years. It was a college living, of the value of four hundred and

fifty pounds a year, and it had been conferred upon the Rev. Reginald Chester, who was a fellow of the college, as long ago as the time I mention. Mr. Chester was a very good scholar, and a man of very refined tastes. He had lived in his rooms at Oxford, and in various choice regions of the world, specially in France and Italy, up to the age of forty, indulging all his favourite (and quite virtuous) tastes, and living a very pleasant if not a very useful life. He had a little fortune of his own, and he had his fellowship, and was able to keep up congenial society, and to indulge himself in almost all the indulgences he liked. Why he should have accepted the living of Brentburn it would be hard to say; I suppose there is always an attraction, even to the most philosophical, in a few additional hundreds a year. He took it, keeping out poor Arlington, who had the next

claim, and who wanted to marry, and longed for a country parish. Mr. Chester did not want to marry, and hated everything parochial; but he took the living all the same. He came to live at Brentburn in the beginning of summer, furnishing the house substantially, with Turkey carpets, and huge mountains of mahogany —for the science of furniture had scarcely been developed in those days; and for the first few months, having brought an excellent cook with him, and finding his friends in town quite willing to spend a day or two by times in the country, and being within an hour's journey of London, he got on tolerably well. But the winter was a very different matter. His friends no longer cared to come. There was good hunting to be sure, but Mr. Chester's friends in general were not hunting men, and the country was damp and rheumatic, and the society more agricultural than

intellectual. Then his cook, still more important, mutinied. She had never been used to it, and her kitchen was damp, and she had no means of improving herself "in this hole," as she irreverently called the rectory of Brentburn. Heroically, in spite of this, in spite of the filthy roads, the complaints of the poor, an indifferent cook, and next to no society, Mr. Chester held out for two long years. The damp crept on him, into his very bones. He got incipient rheumatism, and he had a sharp attack of bronchitis. This was in spring, the most dangerous season when your lungs are weak; and in Mr. Chester's family there had at one time been a girl who died of consumption. He was just at the age when men are most careful of their lives, when, awaking out of the confidence of youth, they begin to realize that they are mortal, and one day or

other must die. He took fright; he consulted a kind physician, who was quite ready to certify that his health required Mentone or Spitzbergen, whichever the patient wished; and then Mr. Chester advertised for a curate. The parish was so small that up to this moment he had not had any occasion for such an article. He got a most superior person, the Rev. Cecil St. John, who was very ready and happy to undertake all the duties for less than half of the stipend. Mr. Chester was a liberal man in his way. He let Mr. St. John have the rectory to live in, and the use of all his furniture, except his best Turkey carpets, which it must be allowed were too good for a curate; and then, with heart relieved, he took his way into the south and the sunshine. What a relief it was! He soon got better at Mentone, and went on to more amusing

and attractive places; but as it was on account of his health that he had got rid of his parish, consistency required that he should continue to be "delicate." Nothing is more easy than to manage this when one has money enough and nothing to do. He bought a small villa near Naples, with the best possible aspect, sheltered from the east wind. He became a great authority on the antiquities of the neighbourhood, and in this way had a constant change and variety of the very best society. He took great care of himself; was never out at sunset, avoided the sirocco, and took great precautions against fever. He even began to plan a book about Pompeii. And thus the years glided by quite peacefully in the most refined of occupations, and he had almost forgotten that he ever was rector of Brentburn. Young fellows of his college recollected it from time to

time, and asked querulously if he never meant to die. "You may be sure he will never die if he can help it," the Provost of that learned community replied, chuckling, for he knew his man. And meantime Mr. St. John, who was the curate in charge, settled down and made himself comfortable, and forgot that he was not there in his own right. It is natural a man should feel so who has been priest of a parish for nearly twenty years.

This Mr. St. John was a man of great tranquillity of mind, and with little energy of disposition. Where he was set down there he remained, taking all that Providence sent him very dutifully, without any effort to change what might be objectionable or amend what was faulty; nobody could be more accomplished than he was in the art of "putting up with" whatsoever befell him. When once he

had been established anywhere, only something from without could move him—never any impulse from within. He took what happened to him, as the birds took the crumbs he threw out to them, without question or preference. The only thing in which he ever took an initiative was in kindness. He could not bear to hurt any one's feelings, to make any one unhappy, and by dint of his submissiveness of mind he was scarcely ever unhappy himself. The poor people all loved him; he never could refuse them anything, and his reproofs were balms which broke no man's head. He was indeed, but for his sympathy, more like an object in nature—a serene, soft hillside touched by the lights and shadows of changeable skies, yet never really affected by them except for the moment—than a suffering and rejoicing human creature.

"On a fair landscape some have looked
And felt, as I have heard them say,
As if the fleeting time had been
A thing as steadfast as the scene
On which they gazed themselves away."

This was the effect Mr. St. John produced upon his friends and the parish; change seemed impossible to him—and that he could die, or disappear, or be anything different from what he was, was as hard to conceive as it was to realize that distinct geological moment when the hills were all in fusion, and there was not a tree in the forest. That this should be the case in respect to the curate in charge, whose position was on sufferance, and whom any accident happening to another old man in Italy, or any caprice of that old man's fancy, could sweep away out of the place as if he had never been, gave additional quaintness yet power to the universal impression. Nobody could

imagine what Brentburn would be like without Mr. St. John, and he himself was of the same mind.

At the period when this story commences the curate was a widower with "two families." He had been so imprudent as to marry twice; he had two daughters grown up, who were coming to him, but had not arrived, and he had two little baby boys, whose mother had recently died. But how this mother and these boys came about, to Mr. St. John's great surprise—and who the daughters were who were coming to take charge of him—I must tell before I go on any further. The whole episode of his second marriage was quite accidental in the curate's life.

CHAPTER II.

THE PREVIOUS HISTORY OF MR. ST. JOHN.

THE Reverend Cecil St. John started in life, not so much under a false impression himself, as conveying one right and left wherever he moved. With such a name it seemed certain that he must be a man of good family, well-connected to the highest level of good connections; but he was not. I cannot tell how this happened, or where he got his name. When he was questioned about his family he declared himself to have no relations at all. He was his father's only child, and his father had been some one else's only

child; and the result was that he had nobody belonging to him. The people at Weston-on-Weir, which was his first curacy, had a tradition that his grandfather had been disowned and disinherited by his family on account of a romantic marriage; but this, I fear, was pure fable invented by some parish authority with a lively imagination. All the years he spent at Weston nobody, except an old pupil, ever asked for him; he possessed no family possessions, not even an old seal, or bit of china. His father had been a curate before him, and was dead and gone, leaving no ties in the world to his only boy. This had happened so long ago that Mr. St. John had long ceased to be sad about it before he came to Weston, and though the ladies there were very sorry for his loneliness, I am not sure that it occurred to himself to be sorry. He was used to it. He had stayed in Ox-

ford for some years after he took his degree, working with pupils; so that he was about five and thirty when he took his first curacy, moved, I suppose, by some sense of the monotony of an unprogressive life. At five and thirty one has ceased to feel certain that everything must go well with one, and probably it occurred to him that the Church would bring repose and quiet, which he loved, and possibly some quiet promotion. Therefore he accepted the curacy of Weston-on-Weir, and got lodgings in Mrs. Joyce's, and settled there. The parish was somewhat excited about his coming, and many people at first entertained the notion that his proper title was Honourable and Reverend. But, alas! that turned out, as I have said, a delusion. Still, without the honourable, such a name as that of Cecil St. John was enough to flutter a parish, and did so.

Even the sight of him did not dissipate the charm, for he was handsome, very tall, slight, serious, and interesting. "Like a young widower," some of the ladies thought; others, more romantic, felt that he must have a history, must have sustained a blight; but if he had, he never said anything about it, and settled down to his duties in a calm matter-of-fact sort of way, as if his name had been John Smith.

Everybody who knows Weston-on-Weir is aware that Mrs. Joyce's cottage is very near the vicarage. The vicar, Mr. Maydew, was an old man, and all but incapable of work, which was the reason why he kept a curate. He was a popular vicar, but a selfish man, whose family had always been swayed despotically by his will, though scarcely any of them were aware of it, for his iron hand was hidden in the velvetest of gloves, and all

the Maydews were devoted to their father. He had sent one son to India, where he died, and another to Australia, where he had been lost for years. His eldest daughter had married a wealthy person in Manchester, but had died too, at an early age, for none of them were strong; thus his youngest daughter, Hester, was the only one left to him. Her he could not spare; almost from her cradle he had seen that this was the one to be his companion in his old age, and inexorably he had guarded her for this fate. No man had ever been allowed to approach Hester, in whose eyes any gleam of admiration or kindness for her had appeared. It had been tacitly understood all along that she was never to leave her father, and as he was very kind in manner, Hester accepted the lot with enthusiasm, and thought it was her own choice, and that nothing could ever tempt her to abandon

him. What was to become of her when her father had left her, Hester never asked herself, and neither did the old man, who was less innocent in his thoughtlessness. "Something will turn up for Hester," he said in his cheerful moods, and "the Lord will provide for so good a daughter," he said in his solemn ones. But he acted as if it were no concern of his, and so, firm in doing the duty that lay nearest her hand, did she, which was less wonderful. Hester had lived to be thirty when Mr. St. John came to Weston. She was already called an old maid by the young and gay, and even by the elder people about. She was almost pretty in a quiet way, though many people thought her *quite* plain. She had a transparent, soft complexion, not brilliant, but pure; soft brown eyes, very kind and tender; fine silky brown hair, and a trim figure; but no features to speak of, and no style, and

lived contented in the old rotten tumble-down vicarage, doing the same thing every day at the same hour year after year, serving her father and the parish, attending all the church services, visiting the schools and the sick people. I hope good women who live in this dutiful routine get to like it, and find a happiness in the thought of so much humble handmaiden's work performed so steadily; but to the profane and the busy it seems hard thus to wear away a life.

When Mr. St. John came to the parish it was avowedly to relieve old Mr. Maydew of the duty, not to help him in it. Now and then the old vicar would show on a fine day, and preach one of his old sermons; but, except for this, everything was left to Mr. St. John. He was not, however, allowed on that account to rule the parish. He had to go and come constantly to the vicarage to receive

directions, or advice which was as imperative; and many a day walked to church or into the village with Miss Hester, whom nobody ever called Miss Maydew, though she had for years had a right to the name. The result, which some people thought very natural, and some people quite absurd, soon followed. Quietly, gradually, the two fell in love with each other. There were people in the parish who were quite philanthropically indignant when they heard of it, and very anxious that Mr. St. John should be undeceived, if any idea of Hester Maydew having money was in his thoughts. But they might have spared themselves the trouble. Mr. St. John was not thinking of money. He was not even thinking of marriage. It never occurred to him to make any violent opposition, when Hester informed him, timidly, fearing I know not what

demonstration of lover-like impatience, of her promise never to leave her father. He was willing to wait. To spend every evening in the vicarage, so see her two or three times a day, going and coming; to consult her on everything, and inform her of everything that happened to him, was quite enough for the curate. He used to tell her so; while Hester's heart, wrung with pleasure and pain together, half stood still with wonder, not knowing how a man could bear it, yet glad he should. How much there is in the hearts of such good women which never can come into words! She had in her still soul a whole world of ideal people —the ideal man as well as the ideal woman—and her ideal man would not have been content. Yet *he* was, and she was glad; or rather I should say thankful, which is a different feeling. And thus they went on for ten years. Ten

years! an eternity to look forward to—a lifetime to look back upon; yet slipping away so softly, day upon day, that Mr. St. John at least never realized the passage of time. He was a very good clergyman, very kind to the poor people and to the children, very ready to be of service to any one who wanted his services, seeking no diversion or ease except to go down to the vicarage in the evening by that path which his patient feet had made, to play backgammon with the vicar and talk to Hester. I cannot see, for my part, why they should not have married, and occupied the vicarage together; but such an arrangement would not have suited Mr. Maydew, and Hester was well aware of the impossibility of serving two masters. So year came after year, and hour after hour, as if there were no changes in human existence, but everything was as steady and immovable

as the surface of that tranquil rural world.

When Mr. Maydew died at last it was quite a shock to the curate; and then it was evident that something must be done. They hoped for a little while that Lord Weston might have given the living to Mr. St. John, who was so much beloved in the parish; but it had been promised years before to his old tutor, and there was an end of that expectation. I think Hester had almost come to doubt whether her curate had energy to marry her when she was thus set free; but there she did him injustice. Though he had not a notion how they were to live, he would have married her on the spot had decorum permitted. It was some time, however, before he heard of anything which would justify them in marrying. He had little interest out of the parish, and was shy of asking any-

thing from the few people he did know. When they were told of Brentburn, and the rector's bad health, they both felt it a special providence that Mr. Chester's lungs should be weak. There was the rectory to live in, and two hundred pounds a year, which seemed a fortune to them both; and they married upon it with as much confidence as if it had been two thousand. They were almost old people when they set off from the little church at Weston bride and bridegroom; yet very young in the tranquillity of their souls. Mr. St. John was thoroughly happy—not much more happy indeed than when he had walked down across the grass to the vicarage—but not less so; and if Hester felt a thrill of disappointment deep down in her heart at his calm, she loved him all the same, and knew his goodness, and was happy too. She was a woman of genius in her

way—not poetical or literary genius—but that which is as good, perhaps better. She managed to live upon her two hundred a year as few of us can do upon three or four times the sum. Waste was impossible to her; and want appeared as impossible. She guided her house as—well, as only genius can—without any pitiful economies, without any undue sparing, making a kind, warm, beneficent, living house of it, and yet keeping within her income. I don't pretend to know how she did it, any more than I can tell you how Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. It was quite easy to him—and to her; but if one knew how, one would be as great a poet as he was, as great an economist as she. Mr. St. John was perfectly happy; perhaps even a little more happy than when he used to walk nightly to her father's vicarage. The thought that he was only curate in

charge, and that his rector might get better and come back, or get worse and die, never troubled his peace. Why should not life always go as it was doing? why should anything ever happen? Now and then he would speak of the vicissitudes of mortal existence in his placid little sermons; but he knew nothing of them, and believed still less. It seemed to him as if this soft tranquillity, this sober happiness was fixed like the pillars of the earth, and would never come to an end.

Nor is it possible to tell how it was, that to this quiet pair two such restless atoms of humanity as the two girls whose story is to be told here should have been born. Hester's old nurse, indeed, had often been heard to tell fabulous stories of the energy and animation of her young mistress in the days of her youth, but these had always been believed in Weston

to be apocryphal. The appearance of her children, however, gave some semblance of truth to the tale. They were the most living creatures in all the parish of Brentburn. These two children, from the time they were born, were ready for anything—nothing daunted them or stilled them—they did not know what fear was. Sometimes there passed through the mind of their mother a regret that they were not boys: but then she would think of her husband and the regret was never expressed. Their very vitality and activity made them easy to train, and she taught them, poor soul, and spent her strength upon them as if she knew what was coming. She taught them her own household ways, and her economy as far as children could learn it, and to read and write, and their notes on the old piano. This was all she had time for. She died when Cicely was

twelve and Mab eleven. God help us! what it must be when a woman has to consent to die and leave her little children to fight their own way through this hard world, who can venture to tell? For my part, I cannot so much as think of it. Something comes choking in one's throat, climbing like Lear's *hysterica passio*. Ah, God help us indeed! to think of it is terrible, to do it—— Poor Hester had to accept this lot and cover her face and go away, leaving those two to make what they could of their life. Her death stupefied Mr. St. John. He could not believe it, could not understand it. It came upon him like a thunderbolt, incredible, impossible; yet, to be sure, he had to put up with it like other men. And so tranquil was his soul that by-and-by he quite learned to put up with it, and grew calm again, and made himself a path across the

common to the churchyard gate which led to her grave, just as he had made himself a path to her father's door. Everything passes away except human character and individuality, which outlive all convulsions. The parish of Brentburn, which like him was stupefied for the moment, could not contain its admiration when it was seen how beautifully he bore it—"Like a true Christian," the people said—like himself I think; and he was a good Christian, besides being so placid a man.

The two children got over it too in the course of nature; they had passions of childish anguish, unspeakable dumb longings which no words could utter; and then were hushed and stilled, and after a while were happy again; life must defend itself with this natural insensibility or it could not be life at all. And Mr. St. John's friends and parish-

ioners were very kind to him, especially in the matter of advice, of which he stood much in need. His "plans" and what he should do were debated in every house in the parish before poor Hester was cold in her grave; and the general conclusion which was almost unanimously arrived at was—a governess. A governess was the right thing for him, a respectable, middle-aged person who would have no scheme for marrying in her head—not a person of great pretensions, but one who would take entire charge of the girls (whom their mother, poor soul, had left too much to themselves), and would not object to give an eye to the housekeeping—of ladylike manners, yet perhaps not *quite* a lady either, lest she might object to the homelier offices cast upon her. Mrs. Ascott, of the Heath, happened to know exactly the right person, the very thing for poor Mr. St. John

and his girls. And Mr. St. John accepted the advice of the ladies of the parish with gratitude, confessing piteously that he did not at all know what to do: So Miss Brown arrived six months after Mrs. St. John's death. She was not too much of a lady. She was neither old nor young, she was subject to neuralgia; her complexion and her eyes were grey, like her dress, and she had no pretensions to good looks. But with these little drawbacks, which in her position everybody argued were no drawbacks at all, but rather advantages, she was a good woman, and though she did not understand them, she was kind to the girls. Miss Brown, however, was not in any respect a woman of genius, and even had she been so her gifts would have been neutralized by the fact that she was not the mistress of the house, but only the governess. The maid who

had worked so well under Hester set up pretensions to be housekeeper too, and called herself the cook, and assumed airs which Miss Brown got the better of with great difficulty; and the aspect of the house changed. Now and then indeed a crisis arrived which troubled Mr. St. John's peace of mind very much, when he was appealed to one side or the other. But yet the life of the household had been so well organized that it went on *tant bien que mal* for several years. And the two girls grew healthy, and handsome, and strong. Miss Brown did her very best for them. She kept them down as much as she could, which she thought was her duty, and as what she could do in this way was but small, the control she attained to was an unmixed advantage to them. Poor Hester had called her eldest child Cecil, after her father, with a touch of tender senti-

ment; but use and fondness, and perhaps a sense that the more romantic appellation sounded somewhat weak-minded, had long ago improved it into Cicely. Mabel got her name from a similar motive, because it was pretty. It was the period when names of this class came into fashion, throwing the old-fashioned Janes and Elizabeths into temporary eclipse; but as the girls grew up and it came to be impossible to connect her with any two-syllabled or dignified word, the name lent itself to abbreviation and she became Mab. They were both pretty girls. Cicely had her mother's softness, Mab her father's more regular beauty. They spent their lives in the pure air, in the woods, which were so close at hand, in the old-fashioned garden which they partly cultivated, or, when they could get so far, on those bleaker commons and pine forests, where the breezes went

to their young heads like wine. Miss Brown's friends in the parish "felt for her" with two such wild creatures to manage; and she occasionally "felt for" herself, and sighed with a gentle complacency to think of the "good work" she was doing. But I don't think she found her task so hard as she said. The girls did not look up to her, but they looked very kindly down upon her, which came to much the same thing, taking care with youthful generosity not to let her see how much insight they had, or how they laughed between themselves at her mild little affectations. Children are terribly sharp-sighted, and see through these innocent pretences better than we ourselves do. They took care of her often when she thought she was taking care of them; and yet they learned the simple lessons she gave them with something like pleasure; for their

natures were so vigorous and wholesome that even the little tedium was agreeable as a change. And for their father they entertained a kind of half-contemptuous—nay, the word is too hard—a kind of condescending worship. He was a god to them, but a god who was very helpless, who could do little for himself, who was inferior to them in all practical things, though more good, more kind, more handsome, more elevated than any other mortal. This was, on the whole, rather safe ground for two such active-minded young persons. They were prepared to see him do foolish things now and then. It was "papa's way," which they accepted without criticism, smiling to one another, but in their minds he was enveloped in a sort of feeble divinity, a being in whom certain weaknesses were understood, but whose pedestal of superiority no other human creature

could approach. Thus things went on till Cicely was fifteen, when important changes took place in their lives, and still more especially in their father's life.

CHAPTER III.

AUNT JANE.

THE St. Johns had one relative, and only one, so far as they knew. This was Miss Jane Maydew, who lived in London, the aunt of their mother, a lady who possessed in her own right—but, alas, only in the form of an annuity—the magnificent income of two hundred and fifty pounds a year. To think that this old lady, with only herself to think of, should have fifty pounds more yearly than a clergyman with a family, and all the parish looking to him! More than once this idea had crossed even Hester's mind,

though she was very reasonable and could make her pounds go further than most people. Miss Maydew was not very much older than her niece, but yet she was an old lady, sixty-five, or thereabouts. She liked her little comforts as well as most people, yet she had laid by fifty pounds of her income for the last twenty years, with the utmost regularity. A thousand pounds is a pretty little sum of money, but it does not seem much to account for twenty years of savings. A stockbroker might make it easily in a morning by a mere transfer from one hand to another; and to think how much wear and tear of humanity can be in it on the other hand! It is discouraging to poor economists to feel how little they can do, labour as they may; but I don't think Miss Maydew had anything of this feeling. She was on the contrary very proud

of her thousand pounds. It was her own creation, she had made it out of nothing; and the name of it, a thousand pounds! was as a strain of music in her ears, like the name of a favourite child. Perhaps it was the completion of this beautiful sum, rounded and finished like a poem, which gave her something of that satisfaction and wish for repose which follows the completion of every great work; and this brought about her visit to Brentburn, and all that directly and indirectly followed it. She had not seen the St. Johns since Hester's death, though they were her nearest relatives, the natural heirs of the fortune she had accumulated. And the summer was warming into June, and everything spoke of the country. Miss Maydew lived in Great Coram Street, Russell Square. She had two charming large rooms, her bedroom at the back, her sitting-room

at the front, the two drawing-rooms in better days of the comfortable Bloomsbury mansion. But even when your rooms are airy and cool, it is hard to fight against that sense of summer which drops into a London street in the warm long days, waking recollections of all kinds, making eyelids drowsy, and the imagination work. Even the cries in the street, the "flowers a blowing and a growing" of the costermongers, the first vegetables, the "groundsel for your birds," and the very sight of the greengrocer opposite with his groves of young cabbages and baskets of young potatoes awoke this sensation of summer in the heart of the solitary woman at her window. Her youth, which was so full of summer, stirred in her once more, and old scenes all framed in waving foliage of trees and soft enclosures of greensward, came before her closed eyes as she dozed through the

long long sunny afternoon. A frugal old maiden, lodging in two rooms in a noisy Bloomsbury street, and saving fifty pounds a year, is as little safe as any poet from such visitations. As she sat there musing in that strange confusion of mind which makes one wonder sometimes whether the things one recollects ever were, or were merely a dream, Hester and Hester's children came into Miss Maydew's mind. She had not seen them since her niece's death, and what might have become of the poor children left with that incapable father? This thought simmered in her fancy for a whole week, then suddenly one morning when it was finer than ever, and the very canaries sang wildly in their cages, and the costermongers' cries lost all their hoarseness in the golden air, she took the decided step of going off to the railway and taking a ticket for Brentburn. It was

not very far, an hour's journey only, and there was no need to take any luggage with her, as she could return the same night; so the excursion was both cheap and easy, as mild an extravagance as heart could desire.

The air was full of the wild sweet freshness of the pines as she landed on the edge of the common; the seed pods on the gorse bushes were crackling in the heat, the ragged hedges on the roadside hung out long pennons of straggling branches, blossomed to the very tips with wild roses delicately sweet. Miss Maydew was not long in encountering the objects of her interest. As she went along to the rectory, carrying her large brown sunshade open in one hand, and her large white pocket-handkerchief to fan herself in the other, her ears and her eyes were alike attracted by a little group, under the shadow of a great tree just

where the gorse and the pines ended. There were two tall girls in print frocks of the simplest character, and large hats of coarse straw; and seated on the root of the tree slightly raised above them, a plain little woman in a brown gown. Some well worn volumes were lying on the grass, but the book which one of the girls held in her hand, standing up in an attitude of indignant remonstrance, was a square slim book of a different aspect. The other held a huge pencil, one of those weapons red at one end and blue at the other which schoolboys love, which she twirled in her fingers with some excitement. Miss Maydew divined at once who they were, and walking slowly, listened. Their voices were by no means low, and they were quite unconscious of auditors and indifferent who might hear.

"What does 'nice' mean?" cried the elder, flourishing the book. "Why, is it

not ladylike? If one is clever, and has a gift, is one not to use it? Not *nice*? I want to know what *nice* means?"

"My dear," said the governess, "I wish you would not always be asking what everything means. A great many things are understood without explanation in good society——"

"But we don't know anything about good society, nor society at all. Why is it not nice for Mab to draw? Why is it unladylike?" cried the girl, her eyes sparkling. As for the other one, she shrugged her shoulders, and twirled her pencil, while Miss Brown looked at them with a feeble protestation, clasping her hands in despair.

"Oh, Cicely! never anything but why? —why?" she said, with lofty, yet pitying disapproval. "You may be sure it is so when I say it." Then, leaving this high position for the more dangerous exercise

of reason. "Besides, the more one thinks of it, the more improper it seems. There are drawings of *gentlemen* in that book. Is that nice, do you suppose? Gentlemen! Put it away; and, Mabel, I desire you never to do anything so very unladylike again."

"But, Miss Brown!" said the younger; "there are a great many gentlemen in the world. I can't help seeing them, can I?"

"A young lady who respects herself, and who has been brought up as she ought, never looks at gentlemen. No, you can't help seeing them; but to draw them you must *look* at them; you must study them. Oh!" said Miss Brown with horror, putting up her hands before her eyes, "never let me hear of such a thing again. Give me the book, Cicely. It is too dreadful. I ought to burn it; but at least I must lock it away."

"Don't be afraid, Mab; she shan't have the book," said Cicely, with flashing eyes, stepping back, and holding the volume behind her in her clasped hands.

Just then Miss Maydew touched her on the sleeve. "I can't be mistaken," said the old lady; "you are so like your poor mother. Are you not Mr. St. John's daughter? I suppose you don't remember me?"

"It is Aunt Jane," whispered Mab in Cicely's ear, getting up with a blush, more conscious of the interruption than her sister was. The artist had the quickest eye.

"Yes, it is Aunt Jane; I am glad you recollect," said Miss Maydew. "I have come all the way from town to pay you a visit, and that is not a small matter on such a hot day."

"Papa will be very glad to see you," said Cicely, looking up shy but pleased,

with a flood of colour rushing over her face under the shade of her big hat. She was doubtful whether she should put up her pretty cheek to kiss the stranger, or wait for that salutation. She put out her hand, which seemed an intermediate measure. "I am Cicely," she said, "and this is Mab; we are very glad to see you, Aunt Jane."

Miss Brown got up hastily from under the tree, and made the stranger a curtsy. She gave a troubled glance at the girls' frocks, which were not so fresh as they might have been. "You will excuse their schoolroom dresses," she said, "we were not expecting any one; and it was so fine this morning that I indulged the young ladies, and let them do their work here. Ask your aunt, my dears, to come in."

"Work!" said Miss Maydew, somewhat crossly, "I heard nothing but talk. Yes, I should like to go in, if you please.

It is a long walk from the station—and so hot. Why, it is hotter here than in London, for all you talk about the country. There you can always get shade on one side of the street. This is like a furnace. I don't know how you can live in such a blazing place;" and the old lady fanned herself with her large white handkerchief, a sight which brought gleams of mischief into Mab's brown eyes. The red and blue pencil twirled more rapidly round than ever in her fingers, and she cast a longing glance at the sketch-book in Cicely's hand. The girls were quite cool, and at their ease under the great beech-tree, which threw broken shadows far over the grass,—shadows which waved about as the big boughs did, and refreshed the mind with soft visionary fanning. Their big hats shadowed two faces, fresh and cool like flowers, with that downy bloom upon them which is the privilege

of extreme youth. Miss Brown, who was concerned about their frocks, saw nothing but the creases in their pink and white garments; but what Miss Maydew saw was (she herself said) "a picture;" two fair slim things in white, with touches of pink, in soft shade, with bright patches of sunshine flitting about them, and the green background of the common rolled back in soft undulations behind. Poor lady! she was a great contrast to this picture; her cheeks flushed with the heat, her bonnet-strings loosed, fanning herself with her handkerchief. And this was what woke up those gleams of fun in Mab's saucy eyes.

"But it is not hot," said Mab. "How can you speak of a street when you are on the common? Don't you smell the pines, Aunt Jane, and the honey in the gorse? Come under the tree near to us; it is not the least hot here."

"You are a conceited little person," said Aunt Jane.

"Oh no! she is not conceited—she is only decided in her opinions," said Cicely. "You see *we* are not hot in the shade. But come in this way, the back way, through the garden, which is always cool. Sit down here in the summer-house, Aunt Jane, and rest. I'll run and get you some strawberries. They are just beginning to get ripe."

"You are a nice little person," said Miss Maydew, sitting down with a sigh of relief. "I don't want any strawberries, but you can come and kiss me. You are very like your poor mother. As for that thing, I don't know who she is like—not our family, I am sure."

"She is like the St. John's," said Cicely solemnly; "she is like papa."

Mab only laughed. She did not mind what people said. "I'll kiss you, too,"

she said, "Aunt Jane, if you like; though you don't like me."

"I never said I didn't like you. I am not so very fond of my family as that. One can see you are a pickle, though I don't so much mind that either; but I like to look at this one, because she is like your poor mother. Dear, dear! Hester's very eyes, and her cheeks like two roses, and her nice brown wavy hair!"

The girls drew near with eager interest, and Mab took up in her artist's fingers a great handful of the hair which lay upon her sister's shoulders. "Was mamma's like that?" she said in awe and wonder; and Cicely, too, fixed her eyes upon her own bright locks reverentially. It gave them a new strange feeling for their mother to think that she had once been a girl like themselves. Strangest thought for a child's mind to

grasp; stranger even than the kindred thought, that one day those crisp half-curling locks, full of threads of gold, would be blanched like the soft braids under Mrs. St. John's cap. "Poor mamma!" they said simultaneously under their breath.

"Brighter than that!" said Miss Maydew, seeing across the mists of years a glorified vision of youth, more lovely than Hester had ever been. "Ah, well!" she added with a sigh, "time goes very quickly, girls. Before you know, you will be old, too, and tell the young ones how pretty you were long ago. Yes, Miss Audacity! you mayn't believe it, but I was pretty, too."

"Oh yes, I believe it!" cried Mab, relieved from the momentary gravity which had subdued her. "You have a handsome nose still, and not nearly so bad a mouth as most people. I should

like to draw you, just as you stood under the beech-tree; that was beautiful!" she cried, clapping her hands. Miss Maydew was pleased. She recollected how she had admired the two young creatures under that far-spreading shade; and it did not seem at all unnatural that they should in their turn have admired her.

"Mabel! Mabel!" said Miss Brown, who knew better, lifting a warning finger. Miss Maydew took up the sketch-book which Cicely had laid on the rough table in the summer-house. "Is this what you were all talking about?" she said. But at this moment the governess withdrew and followed Cicely into the house. She walked through the garden towards the rectory in a very dignified way. She could not stand by and laugh faintly at caricatures of herself as some high-minded people are capable of doing. "I hope Miss Maydew will say what she thinks

very plainly," she said to Cicely, who flew past her in a great hurry with a fresh clean white napkin out of the linen-press. But Cicely was much too busy to reply. As for Mab, I think she would have escaped too, had she been able; but as that was impossible, she stood up very demurely while her old aunt turned over the book, which was a note-book ruled with blue lines, and intended for a more virtuous purpose than that to which it had been appropriated; and it was not until Miss Maydew burst into a short but hearty laugh over a caricature of Miss Brown that Mab ventured to breathe.

"You wicked little thing! Are these yours?" said Miss Maydew; "and how dared you let that poor woman see them? Why, she is there to the life!"

"Oh! Aunt Jane, give me the book! She has never seen them: only a few innocent ones at the beginning. Oh!

please give me the book! I don't want her to see them!" cried Mab.

"You hate her, I suppose?"

"Oh! no, no! give me the book, Aunt Jane! We don't hate her at all; we like her rather. Oh! please give it me before she comes back!"

"Why do you make caricatures of her, then?" said Miss Maydew, fixing her eyes severely on the girl's face.

"Because she is such fun!" cried Mab; "because it is such fun. I don't mean any harm, but if people will look funny, how can I help it? Give me the book, Aunt Jane!"

"I suppose I looked funny too," said Miss Maydew, "under the beech-tree, fanning myself with my pockethandkerchief. I thought I heard you giggle. Go away, you wicked little thing! Here is your sister coming. I like her a great deal better than you!"

"So she is, a great deal better than me," said Mab, picking up her book. She stole away, giving herself a serious lecture, as Cicely tripped into the summer-house carrying a tray. "I must not do it again," she said to herself. "It is silly of me. It is always getting me into scrapes; even papa, when I showed him that one of himself!" Here Mab paused to laugh, for it had been very funny—and then blushed violently; for certainly it was wrong, very wrong to caricature one's papa. "At all events," she said under her breath, "I'll get a book with a lock and key as soon as ever I have any money, and show them only to Cicely; but oh! I must, I must just this once, do Aunt Jane!"

Cicely meanwhile came into the summer-house carrying the tray. "It is not the right time for it, I know," she said, "but I felt sure you would like a

cup of tea. Doesn't it smell nice—like the hay-fields? Tea is always nice, is it not, Aunt Jane?"

"My darling, you are the very image of your poor mother!" said Miss Maydew with tears in her eyes. "She was always one who took the trouble to think what her friends would like best. And what good tea it is, and how nicely served! Was the kettle boiling? Ah! I recognise your dear mother in that. It used always to be a saying with us at home that the kettle should always be boiling in a well-regulated house."

Then the old lady began to ask cunning questions about the household: whether Cicely was in the habit of making tea and carrying trays about, as she did this so nicely; and other close and delicate cross-examinations, by which she found out a great deal about the qualities of the servant and the governess. Miss

Maydew was too clever to tell Cicely what she thought at the conclusion of her inquiry, but she went in thoughtfully to the house, and was somewhat silent as the girls took her all over it—to the best room to take off her bonnet, to their room to see what a pretty view they had, and into all the empty chambers. The comments she made as she followed them were few but significant. "It was rather extravagant of your papa to furnish it all; he never could have wanted so large a house," she said.

"Oh! but the furniture is the Rector's, it is not papa's," cried her conductors, both in a breath.

"I shouldn't like, if I were him, to have the charge of other people's furniture," Miss Maydew replied; and it seemed to the girls that she was rather disposed to find fault with all poor papa's arrangements, though she was so kind to

them. Mr. St. John was "in the parish," and did not come back till it was time for the early dinner; and it was late in the afternoon when Miss Maydew, knocking at his study door, went in alone to "have a talk" with him, with the intention of "giving him her mind" on several subjects, written fully in her face. The study was a well-sized room looking out upon the garden, and furnished with heavy book-shelves and bureaux in old dark coloured mahogany. The carpet was worn, but those mournful pieces of furniture defied the action of time. She looked round upon them with a slightly supercilious critical glance.

"The room is very well furnished," she said, "Mr. St. John; exceedingly well furnished; to rub it up and keep it in order must give your servant a great deal of work."

"It is not my furniture, but Mr.

Chester's, my rector," said the curate; "we never had very much of our own."

"It must give the maid a deal of work all the same, and that's why the girls have so much housemaiding to do, I suppose," said Miss Maydew sharply. "To tell the truth, that was what I came to speak of. I am not at all satisfied, Mr. St. John, about the girls."

"The girls? They are quite well, I think, quite well," said Mr. St. John meekly. He was not accustomed to be spoken to in this abrupt tone.

"I was not thinking of their health; of course they are well; how could they help being well with so much fresh air, and a cow, I suppose, and all that? I don't like the way they are managed. They are nice girls, but that Miss Brown knows just about as much how to manage them as you—as that table does, Mr. St.

John. It is ridiculous. She has no control over them. Now, I'll tell you what is my opinion. They ought to be sent to school."

"To school!" he said, startled. "I thought girls were not sent to school."

"Ah, that is when they have a nice mother to look after them—a woman like poor Hester; but what are those two doing? You don't look after them yourself, Mr. St. John?"

"I suppose it can't be said that I do," he said, with hesitation: "perhaps it is wrong, but what do I know of girls' education? and then they all said I should have Miss Brown."

"Who are 'they all?' You should have asked me. I should never have said Miss Brown. Not that I've anything against her. She is a good, silly creature enough—but pay attention to me, please, Mr. St. John. I say the girls should go to school."

"It is very likely you may be right," said Mr. St. John, who always yielded to impetuosity, "but what should I do with Miss Brown?"

"Send her away—nothing could be more easy—tell her that you shall not want her services any longer. You must give her a month's notice, unless she was engaged in some particular way."

"I don't know," said the curate in trepidation. "Bless me, it will be very unpleasant. What will she do? What do you think she would say? Don't you think, on the whole, we get on very well as we are? I have always been told that it was bad to send girls to school; and besides it costs a great deal of money," he added after a pause. "I don't know if I could afford it; that is a thing which must be thought of," he said, with a sense of relief.

"I have thought of that," said Miss

Maydew triumphantly: "the girls interest me, and I will send them to school. Oh, don't say anything. I don't do it for thanks. To me their improving will be my recompense. Put all anxiety out of your mind; I will undertake the whole——"

"But, Miss Maydew!"

"There are no buts in the matter," said Aunt Jane, rising; "I have quite settled it. I have saved a nice little sum, which will go to them eventually, and I should like to see them in a position to do me credit. Don't say anything, Mr. St. John. Hester's girls!—poor Hester!—no one in the world can have so great a claim upon me; and no one can tell so well as I what they lost in poor Hester, Mr. St. John—and what you lost as well."

The curate bowed his head. Though he was so tranquil and resigned, the

name of his Hester went to his heart, with a dull pang, perhaps—for he was growing old, and had a calm unimpassioned spirit—but still with a pang, and no easy words of mourning would come to his lip.

"Yes, indeed," said Aunt Jane, "I don't know that I ever knew any one like her; and her girls shall have justice, they shall have justice, Mr. St. John. I mean to make it my business to find them a school—but till you have heard from me finally," she added, turning back after she had reached the door, "it will be as well not to say anything to Miss Brown."

"Oh no," said the curate eagerly, "it will be much best to say nothing to Miss Brown."

Miss Maydew nodded at him confidentially as she went away, and left him in all the despair of an unexpected crisis. *He* say anything to Miss Brown! What

should he say? That he had no further occasion for her services? But how could he say so to a lady? Had he not always gone upon the amiable ground that she had done him the greatest favour in coming there to teach his daughters, and now to dismiss her—to *dismiss* her! Mr. St. John's heart sunk down, down to the very heels of his boots. It was all very easy for Aunt Jane, who had not got it to do; but he, *he!* how was he ever to summon his courage and say anything like this to Miss Brown?

CHAPTER IV.

MISS BROWN.

Mr. St. John's mind was very much moved by this conversation. It threw a shadow over his harmless life. He could not say good night or good morning to Miss Brown without feeling in his very soul the horror of the moment when he should have to say to her that he had no further need for her services. To say it to Hannah in the kitchen would have been dreadful enough, but in that case he could at least have employed Miss Brown, or even Cicely, to do it for him, whereas now he could employ no one. Some-

times, from the mere attraction of horror, he would rehearse it under his breath when he sat up late, and knew that no one was up in the rectory, or when he was alone on some quiet road at the other extremity of the parish. "I shall have no further need for your services." Terrible formula! the mere thought of which froze the blood in his veins. This horror made him less sociable than he had ever been. He took no more of those evening walks which he had once liked in his quiet way, —when, the two girls speeding on before, with their restless feet, he would saunter along the twilight road after them, at ease and quiet, with his hands under his coat-tails; while little Miss Brown, generally a step or two behind, came trotting after him with her small steps, propounding little theological questions or moral doubts upon which she would like to have his opinion. The evening

stillness, the shadowy, soft gloom about, the mild, grey mist of imperfect vision that made everything dreamy and vague, suited him better than the light and colour of the day. As he wandered on, in perfect repose and ease, with the two flitting figures before him, darting from side to side of the road, and from bush to bush of the common, their voices sounding like broken links of music; notwithstanding all that he had had in his life to wear him down, the curate was happy. Very often at the conclusion of these walks he would go through the churchyard and stand for a moment at the white cross over his wife's grave. But this act did not change his mood; he went there as he might have gone had Hester been ill in bed, to say softly, "Good night, my dear," through the closed curtains. She made him no reply; but she was well off and happy, dear soul! and why should

not he be so too? And when he went in to supper after, he was always very cheerful; it was with him the friendliest moment of the day.

But this was all over since Miss Maydew's visit; the thought of the moment, no doubt approaching, when he would have to say, "I shall have no further need for your services," overwhelmed him. He had almost said it over like a parrot on several occasions, so poisoned was his mind by the horror that was to come. And Miss Maydew, I need not say, did not let any grass grow under her feet in the matter. She was so convinced of Miss Brown's incapacity, and so eager in following out her own plan, and so much interested in the occupation it gave her, that her tranquil life was quite revolutionized by it. She went to call upon all her friends, and consulted them anxiously about the

young ladies' schools they knew. "It must not be too expensive, but it must be very good," she told all her acquaintances, who were, like most other people, struck with respect by the name of St. John. Almost an excitement arose in that quiet, respectable neighbourhood, penetrating even into those stately houses in Russell Square, at two or three of which Miss Maydew visited. "Two very sweet girls, the daughters of a clergyman, the sort of girls whom it would be an advantage to any establishment to receive," Miss Maydew's friend said; and the conclusion was, that the old lady found "vacancies" for her nieces in the most unexpected way in a school of very high pretensions indeed, which gladly accepted, on lower terms than usual, girls so well recommended, and with so well-sounding a name. She wrote with triumph in her heart to their father as

soon as she had arrived at this summit of her wishes, and, I need not say, carried despair to his. But even after he had received two or three warnings, Mr. St. John could not screw his courage to the sticking point for the terrible step that was required of him; and it was only a letter from Miss Maydew, announcing her speedy arrival to escort the girls to their school, and her desire that their clothes should be got ready, that forced him into action. A more miserable man was not in all the country than, when thus compelled by fate, the curate was. He had not been able to sleep all night for thinking of this dreadful task before him. He was not able to eat any breakfast, and the girls were consulting together what could be the matter with papa when he suddenly came into the schoolroom, where Miss Brown sat placidly at the large deal table, setting

copies in her neat little hand. All his movements were so quiet and gentle that the abruptness of his despair filled the girls with surprise and dismay.

"Papa came flouncing in," Mab said, who was partly touched and partly indignant—indignant at being sent off to school, touched by the sight of his evident emotion. The girls believed that this emotion was called forth by the idea of parting with them; they did not know that it was in reality a mixture of fright and horror as to how he was to make that terrible announcement to Miss Brown.

"My dears," he said, faltering, "I have got a letter from your aunt Jane. I am afraid it will take you by surprise as—as it has done me. She wants you to—go—to school."

"To school!" they cried both together, in unfeigned horror and alarm. Miss

Brown, who had been ruling her copy-books very nicely, acknowledging Mr. St. John's entrance only by a smile, let the pencil drop out of her hand.

"It is—very sudden," he said, trembling—"very sudden. Your poor aunt is that kind of woman. She means to be very kind to you, my dears; and she has made up her mind that you must be educated——"

"Educated! Are we not being educated now? Miss Brown teaches us everything—everything we require to know," said Cicely, her colour rising, planting herself in front of the governess; as she had sprung up to defend her sister, when Miss Maydew saw her first. At that age Cicely was easily moved to indignation, and started forward perhaps too indiscriminately in behalf of any one who might be assailed. She was ready to put Miss Brown upon the highest

pedestal, whenever a word was said in her disfavour.

"So I think, my dear; so I think," said the frightened curate. "I made that very remark to your aunt; but it is very difficult to struggle against the impetuosity of a lady, and—and perhaps being taken by surprise, I—acquiesced more easily than I ought."

"But we won't go—we can't go," cried Mab. "I shall die, and Cicely will die, if we are sent away from home."

"My dears!" said poor Mr. St. John —this impetuosity was terrible to him— "you must not say so; indeed you must not say so. What could I say to your aunt? She means to give you all she has, and how could I oppose her? She means it for the best. I am sure she means it for the best.

"And did you really consent," said Cicely, seriously, looking him straight

in the eyes, "without ever saying a word to us, or to Miss Brown? Oh, papa, I could not have believed it of you! I hate Aunt Jane! Miss Brown, dear!" cried the girl, throwing her arms suddenly round the little governess, "it is not Mab's fault nor mine!"

Then it was Miss Brown's turn to fall upon the unhappy curate and slay him. "My dear love," she said, "how could I suppose it was your fault or Mab's? Except a little levity now and then, which was to be expected at your age. you have been very good, very good children. There is no fault at all in the matter," she continued, turning with that magnanimity of the aggrieved which is so terrible to an offender, to Mr. St. John. "Perhaps it is a little sudden; perhaps a person so fond of the girls as I am might have been expected to be consulted as to the best school; for there

is a great difference in schools. But Miss Maydew is very impetuous, and I don't blame your dear papa. When do you wish me to leave, sir?" she said, looking at him with a smile, which tortured the curate, upon her lips.

"Miss Brown, I hope you will not think badly of me," he said. "You can't think how hard all this is upon me."

The little woman rose up, and waved her hand with dignity. "We must not enter into such questions," she said; "if you will be so very kind as to tell me when you would like me to go."

I don't know what incoherent words the curate stammered forth: that she should stay as long as she liked; that she must make her arrangements entirely to suit herself; that he had never thought of wishing her to go. This was what he said in much disturbance and

agitation of mind instead of the other formula he had rehearsed about having no further need for her services. All this Miss Brown received with the pale smiling of the injured and magnanimous; while the girls looked fiercely on their father, leaving him alone and undefended. When he got away he was so exhausted that he did not feel able to go out into the parish, but withdrew to his study, where he lurked, half paralyzed, all the rest of the day, like the criminal abandoned by woman and by man, which he felt himself to be.

And I will not attempt to describe the commotion which this announcement raised in the rest of the house. Miss Brown kept up that smile of magnanimous meekness all day. She would not give in. "No, my dears," she said, "there is nothing to be said except that it is a little sudden. I think your papa

is quite right, and that you are getting beyond me."

"It is not papa," said Cicely; "it is that horrible Aunt Jane."

"And she was quite right," said the magnanimous governess; "quite right. She saw that I was not strong enough. It is a little sudden, that is all; and we must not make mountains out of mole-hills, my dears." But she, too, retired to her room early, where, sitting forlorn at the window, she had a good cry, poor soul; for she had begun to grow fond of this rude solitude, and she had no home.

As for the girls, after their first dismay and wrath the tide turned with them. They were going out into the unknown, words which sound so differently to different ears—so miserable to some, so exciting to others. To Cicely and Mab they were exciting only. A new

world, new faces, new people to know, new places to see, new things to hear; gradually they forgot their wrath alike and their emotion at this thought. A thrill of awe, of fear, of delicious curiosity and wonder ran through them. This checked upon their very lips those reproaches which they had been pouring forth, addressed to their father and to Aunt Jane. Would they be miserable after all? should not they, rather, on the whole, *like* it, if it was not wrong to say so? This first silenced, then insinuated into their lips little broken words, questions and wonderings which betrayed to each the other's feelings. "It might be—fun, perhaps," Mab said at last; then looked up frightened at Cicely, wondering if her sister would metaphorically kill her for saying so. But then a gleam in Cicely's eyes looked as if she thought so too.

Miss Brown set about very bravely next morning to get their things in order. She was very brave and determined to be magnanimous, but I cannot say that she was cheerful. It is true that she kept smiling all day long, like Malvolio, though with the better motive of concealing her disappointment and pain and unjust feeling; but the effect of this smile was depressing. She was determined, whatever might happen, to do her duty to the last: and then, what did it matter what should follow? With this valiant resolution she faced the crisis and nobly took up all its duties. She bought I don't know how many dozens of yards of nice "long-cloth," and cut out and made up, chiefly with the sewing-machine, garments which she discreetly called "under-clothing" for the girls; for her delicacy shunned the familiar names of those indispensable

articles. She found it needful that they should have new Sunday frocks, and engaged the parish dressmaker for a week, and went herself to town to buy the stuff, after the girls and she had spent an anxious yet not unpleasant afternoon in looking over patterns. All this she did, and never a word of murmur escaped her lips. She was a heroic woman. And the busy days pursued each other so rapidly that the awful morning came, and the girls weeping, yet not uncheerful, were swept away by the "fly" from the station—where Miss Maydew, red and excited, met them, and carried them off remorseless on their further way—before any one had time to breathe, much less to think. Mr. St. John went to the station with his daughters, and coming back alone and rather sad, for the first time forgot Miss Brown; so that when he heard a low

sound of the piano in the schoolroom he was half frightened, and, without thinking, went straight to the forsaken room to see what it was. Poor curate!—unfortunate Mr. St. John! and not less unfortunate Miss Brown. The music had ceased before he reached the door, and when he went in nothing was audible but a melancholy little sound of sobbing and crying. Miss Brown was sitting before the old piano with her head bowed down in her hands. Her little sniffs and sobs were pitiful to hear. When he spoke she gave a great start, and got up trembling, wiping her tears hastily away with her handkerchief. "Did you speak, sir?" she said, with her usual attempt at cheerfulness. "I hope I did not disturb you; I was—amusing myself a little, until it is time for my train. My th-things are all packed and r-ready," said the poor little woman, making a

deplorable effort at a smile. The sobs in her voice struck poor Mr. St. John to the very heart.

"I have never had time," he said in the tone of a self-condemned criminal, "to ask where you are going, Miss Brown."

"Oh yes, I have a pl-place to go to," she said. "I have written to the Governesses' Institution, Mr. St. John, and very fo-fortunately they have a vacant room."

"The Governesses' Institution! Is that the only place you have to go to?" he said.

"Indeed, it is a very nice place," said Miss Brown; "very quiet and lady-like, and not d-dear. I have, excuse me, I have got so fo-fond of them. I never meant to cry. It is in Harley Street, Mr. St. John, very nice and respectable, and a great b-blessing to have such a place, when one has no h-home."

Mr. St. John walked to the other end of the room, and then back again, twice over. How conscience-stricken he was! While poor Miss Brown bit her lips and winked her eyelids to keep the tears away. Oh, why couldn't he go away, and let her have her cry out? But he did not do that. He stopped short at the table where she had set so many sums and cut out so much underclothing, and half turning his back upon her said, faltering, "Would it not be better to stay here, Miss Brown?"

The little governess blushed from head to foot, I am sure, if any one could have seen; she felt thrills of confusion run all over her at such a suggestion. "Oh, no, no," she cried, "you are very kind, Mr. St. John, but I have nobody but myself to take care of now, and I could not stay here, a day, not now the girls are gone."

The poor curate did not move. He took off the lid of the big inkstand and examined it as if that were what he was thinking of. The Governesses' Institution sounded miserable to him, and what could he do? "Miss Brown," he said in a troubled voice, "if you think you would like to marry me, I have no objection; and then you know you could stay."

"Mr. St. John!"

"Yes; that is the only thing I can think of," he said, with a sigh. "After being here for years, how can you go to a Governesses' Institution? Therefore, if you think you would like it, Miss Brown——"

How can I relate what followed? "Oh, Mr. St. John, you are speaking out of pity, only pity!" said the little woman, with a sudden romantic gleam of certainty that he must have been a victim of

despairing love for her all this time, and that the school-going of the girls was but a device for bringing out his passion. But Mr. St. John did not deny this charge, as she expected he would. "I don't know about pity," he said, confused, "but I am very sorry, and—and I don't see any other way."

This was how it happened that three weeks after the girls went to school Mr. St. John married Miss Brown. She went to the Governesses' Institution after all, resolute in her propriety, until the needful interval had passed, and then she came back as Mrs. St. John, to her own great surprise, and to the still greater surprise and consternation of the curate himself, and of the parish, who could not believe their ears. I need not say that Miss Maydew was absolutely furious, or that it was a great shock to Cicely and Mab when they were told what had

happened. They did not trust themselves to say much to each other on the subject. It was the only subject, indeed, which they did not discuss between themselves; but by-and-by even they got used to it, as people do to everything, and they were quite friendly, though distant, to Mrs. St. John.

Only one other important event occurred to that poor little woman in her life. A year after her marriage she had twin boys, to the still greater consternation of the curate; and three years after this she died. Thus the unfortunate man was left once more with two helpless children on his hands, as helpless himself as either of them, and again subject as before to the advice of all the parish. They counselled him this time "a good nurse," not a governess; but fortunately other actors appeared on the scene before he had time to see the excellent creature

whom Mrs. Brockmill, of Fir Tree House, knew of. While he listened hopelessly, a poor man of sixty-five, casting piteous looks at the two babies whom he had no right, he knew, to have helped into the world, Cicely and Mab, with bright faces and flying feet, were already on the way to his rescue; and here, dear reader, though you may think you already know something of it, this true story really begins.

CHAPTER V.

THE GIRLS AT SCHOOL.

The school to which Miss Maydew sent the girls was in the outskirts of a seaside town, and it was neither the best nor the worst of such establishments. There were some things which all the girls had to submit to, and some which bore especially on the Miss St. Johns, who had been received at a lower price than most of the others; but on the whole the Miss Blandys were good women, and not unkind to the pupils. Cicely and Mab, as sisters, had a room allotted to them in

the upper part of the house by themselves, which was a great privilege—a bare attic room, with, on one side, a sloping roof, no carpet, except a small piece before each small bed, and the most meagre furniture possible. But what did they care for that? They had two chairs on which to sit and chatter facing each other, and a little table for their books and their work. They had a peep at the sea from their window, and they had their youth—what could any one desire more? In the winter nights, when it was cold sitting up in their fireless room, they used to lie down in those two little beds side by side and talk, often in the dark, for the lights had to be extinguished at ten o'clock. They had not spoken even to each other of their father's marriage. This unexpected event had shocked and bewildered them in the fantastic delicacy of their age. They could not bear to

think of their father as so far descended from his ideal elevation, and shed secret tears of rage more than of sorrow when they thought of their mother thus superseded. But the event was too terrible for words, and nothing whatever was said of it between them. When the next great occurrence, the birth of the two babies, was intimated to them, their feelings were different. They were first indignant, almost annoyed; then amused; in which stage Mab made such a sketch of Miss Brown with a baby in each arm, and Mr. St. John pathetically looking on, that they both burst forth into laughter, and the bond of reserve on this event was broken; and then all at once an interest of which they were half ashamed arose in their minds. They fell silent both together in a wondering reverie, and then Mab said to Cicely, turning to her big eyes of surprise—

"They belong to us too, I suppose. What are they to us?"

"Of course our half-brothers," said Cicely; and then there was another pause, partly of awe at the thought of a relationship so mysterious, and partly because it was within five minutes of ten. Then the candle was put out, and they jumped into their beds. On the whole, perhaps, it was more agreeable to talk of their father's other children in the dark, when the half-shame, half-wonder of it would not appear in each face.

"Is one expected to be fond of one's half-brother?" said Mab doubtfully.

"There is one illusion gone," said Cicely, in all the seriousness of sixteen. "I have always been cherishing the idea that when we were quite grown up, instead of going out for governesses or anything of that sort, we might keep together, Mab, and take care of papa."

"But then," said Mab, "what would you have done with Mrs. St. John? I don't see that the babies make much difference. *She* is there to take care of papa."

On this Cicely gave an indignant sigh, but having no answer ready held her peace.

"For my part, I never thought of that," said Mab. "I have always thought it such a pity I am not a boy, for then I should have been the brother and you the sister, and I could have painted and you could have kept my house. I'll tell you what I should like," she continued, raising herself on her elbow with the excitement of the thought; "I should like if we two could go out into the world like Rosalind and Celia.

> 'Were it not better,
> Because that I am more than common tall,
> That I did suit me all points like a man?'"

"But you are not more than common tall," said Cicely, with unsympathetic laughter; "you are a little, tiny, insignificant thing."

Mab dropped upon her pillow half-crying. "You have no feeling," she said. "Aunt Jane says I shall go on growing for two years yet. Mamma did——"

"If you please," said Cicely, "you are not the one that is like mamma."

This little passage of arms stopped the chatter. Cicely, penitent, would have renewed it after an interval, but Mab was affronted. Their father's marriage, however, made a great difference to the girls, even before the appearance of the "second family;" the fact that he had now another housekeeper and companion, and was independent of them affected the imagination of his daughters, though they were scarcely conscious of it. They

no longer thought of going home, even for the longer holidays; and settling down at home after their schooling was over had become all at once impossible. Not that this change led them immediately to make new plans for themselves; for the youthful imagination seldom goes so far unguided except when character is very much developed; and the two were only unsettled, uneasy, not quite knowing what was to become of them; or rather, it was Cicely who felt the unsettledness and uneasiness as to her own future. Mab had never had any doubt about hers since she was ten years old. She had never seen any pictures to speak of, so that I cannot say she was a heaven-born painter, for she scarcely understood what that was. But she meant to draw; her pencil was to be her profession, though she scarcely knew how it was to be wielded, and thus she was delivered

from all her sister's vague feelings of uncertainty. Mab's powers, however, had not been appreciated at first at school, where Miss Maydew's large assertions as to her niece's cleverness had raised corresponding expectations. But when the drawing-master came with his little stock of landscapes to be copied, Mab, quite untutored in this kind, was utterly at a loss. She neither knew how to manage her colours, nor how to follow the vague lines of the "copy," and I cannot describe the humiliation of the sisters, nor the half disappointment, half triumph, of Miss Blandy.

"My dear, you must not be discouraged; I am sure you did as well as you could; and the fact is, we have a very high standard here," the schoolmistress said.

It happened, however, after two or three of these failures that Cicely, sent

by Miss Millicent Blandy on a special message into that retired and solemn chamber, where Miss Blandy the elder sister sat in the mornings supervising and correcting everything, from the exercises to the characters of her pupils, found the head of the establishment with the drawing-master looking over the productions of the week. He had Mab's drawing in his hand, and he was shaking his head over it.

"I don't know what to say about the youngest Miss St. John. This figure is well put in, but her sky and her distance are terrible," he was saying. "I don't think I shall make anything of her."

When Cicely heard this she forgot that she was a girl at school. She threw down a pile of books she was carrying, and flew out of the room without a word, making a great noise with the door.

What she ought to have done was to have made a curtsy, put down the books softly by Miss Blandy's elbow, curtsied again, and left the room noiselessly, in all respects save that of walking backward as she would have done at Court. Need I describe the look of dismay that came into Miss Blandy's face?

"These girls will be my death," she said. "Were there ever such colts?—worse than boys." This was the most dreadful condemnation Miss Blandy ever uttered. "If their aunt does not insist upon drawing, as she has so little real talent, she had better give it up."

At this moment Cicely burst in again breathless, her hair streaming behind her, her dress catching in the door, which she slammed after her. "Look here!" she cried; "look here, before you say Mab has no talent!" and she tossed down on the table the square blue-lined book,

which her sister by this time had almost filled. She stood before them glowing and defiant, with flashing eyes and flowing hair; then she recollected some guilty recent pages, and quailed, putting out her hand for the book again. "Please it is only the beginning, not the end, you are to look at," she said, peremptory yet appealing. Had Miss Blandy alone been in the seat of judgment, she would, I fear, have paid but little attention to this appeal; but the old drawing-master was gentle and kind, as old professors of the arts so often are (for Art is Humanity, I think, almost oftener than letters), and besides, the young petitioner was very pretty in her generous enthusiasm, which affected him both as a man and an artist. The first page at once gave him a guess as to the inexpediency of examining the last; and the old man perceived in a moment at once the mistake he had

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made, and the cause of it. He turned over the first few pages, chuckling amused approbation. "So these are your sister's," he said, and laughed and nodded his kind old head. When he came to a sketch of Hannah, the maid-of-all-work at the rectory, the humour of which might seem more permissible in Miss Blandy's eyes than the caricatures of ladies and gentlemen, he showed it to her; and even Miss Blandy, though meditating downright slaughter upon Cicely, could not restrain a smile. "Is this really Mabel's?" she condescended to ask. "As you say, Mr. Lake, not at all bad; much better than I could have thought."

"Better? it is capital!" said the drawing-master; "and then he shut up the book close, and put it back in Cicely's hands. "I see there are private scribblings in it," he said, with a significant look; "take it back, my dear. I will

speak to Miss Mabel to-morrow. And now, Miss Blandy, we will finish our business, if you please," he said benevolently, to leave time for Cicely and her dangerous volume to escape. Miss Blandy was vanquished by this stratagem, and Cicely, beginning to tremble at the thought of the danger she had escaped, withdrew very demurely, having first piled up on the table the books she had thrown down in her impetuosity. I may add at once that she did not escape without an address, in which withering irony alternated with solemn appeal to her best feelings, and which drew many hot tears from poor Cicely's eyes, but otherwise so far as I am aware did her no harm.

Thus Mab's gifts found acknowledgment at Miss Blandy's. The old drawing-master shook his fine flexible old artist hand at her. "You take us all off, young

lady," he said; "you spare no one; but it is so clever that I forgive you; and by way of punishment you must work hard, now I know what you can do. And don't show that book of yours to anybody but me. Miss Blandy would not take it so well as I do."

"Oh, dear Mr. Lake, forgive me," said Mab, smitten with compunction; "I will never do it again!"

"Never, till the next time," he said, shaking his head; "but, anyhow, keep it to yourself, for it is a dangerous gift."

And from that day he put her on "the figure" and "the round"—studies, in which Mab at first showed little more proficiency than she had done in the humbler sphere of landscape; for having leapt all at once into the exercise of something that felt like original art, this young lady did not care to go back to the elements. However, what with the force

of school discipline, and some glimmerings of good sense in her own juvenile bosom, she was kept to it, and soon found the ground steady under her feet once more, and made rapid progress. By the time they had been three years at school, she was so proficient, that Mr. Lake, on retiring, after a hard-worked life, to well-earned leisure, recommended her as his successor. So that by seventeen, a year before Mrs. St. John's death, Mab had released Miss Maydew and her father from all responsibility on her account. Cicely was not so clever; but she, too, had begun to help Miss Blandy in preference to returning to the rectory and being separated from her sister. Vague teaching of "English" and music is not so profitable as an unmistakable and distinct art like drawing; but it was better than setting out upon a strange world alone, or going back to be a useless

inmate of the rectory. As teachers the girls were both worse off and better off than as pupils. They were worse off because it is a descent in the social scale to come down from the level of those who pay to be taught, to the level of those who are paid for teaching—curious though the paradox seems to be; and they were better off, in so far as they were free from some of the restrictions of school, and had a kind of independent standing. They were allowed to keep their large attic, the bare walls of which were now half covered by Mab's drawings, and which Cicely's instinctive art of household management made to look more cheery and homelike than any other room in the house. They were snubbed sometimes by "parents," who thought the manners of these Miss St. Johns too easy and familiar, as if they were on an equality with their pupils; and by Miss Blandy,

who considered them much too independent in their ways; and now and then had mortifications to bear which are not pleasant to girls. But there were two of them, which was a great matter; and in the continual conversation which they carried on about everything, they consoled each other. No doubt it was hard sometimes to hear music sounding from the open windows of the great house in the square, where their old schoolfellow, Miss Robinson, had come to live, and to see the carriages arriving, and all the glory of the ball-dresses, of which the two young governesses got a glimpse as they went out for a stroll on the beach in the summer twilight, an indulgence which Miss Blandy disapproved of.

"Now, why should people be so different?" Cicely said, moralizing; "why should we have so little, and Alice Robinson so much? It don't seem fair."

"And we are not even prettier than she is, or gooder—which we ought to be, if there is any truth in compensation," said Mab, with a laugh.

"Or happier," said Cicely, with a sigh. "She has the upper hand of us in everything, and no balance on the other side to make up for it. Stay, though; she has very droll people for father and mother, and we have a very fine gentleman for our papa."

"Poor papa!" said Mab. They interchanged moods with each other every ten minutes, and were never monotonous, or for a long time the same.

"You may say why should people be so different," said Cicely, forgetting that it was herself who said it. "There is papa, now; he is delightful, but he is trying. When one thinks how altered everything is—and those two little babies. But yet, you know, we ought to ask

ourselves, 'Were we happier at home, or are we happier here?'"

"We have more variety here," said Mab decisively; "there is the sea, for one thing; there we had only the garden."

"You forget the common; it was as nice as any sea, and never drowned people, or did anything dangerous; and the forest, and the sunset."

"There are sunsets here," said Mab,—"very fine ones. We are not forgotten by the people who manage these things up above. And there is plenty of work; and the girls are amusing, and so are the parents."

"We should have had plenty of work at home," said Cicely; and then the point being carried as far as was necessary the discussion suddenly stopped. They were walking along the sands, almost entirely alone. Only here and there another group would pass them, or

a solitary figure, chiefly tradespeople, taking their evening stroll. The fresh sea-breeze blew in their young faces, the soft dusk closed down over the blue water, which beat upon the shore at their feet in the softest whispering cadence. The air was all musical, thrilled softly by this hush of subdued sound. It put away the sound of the band at Miss Robinson's ball out of the girls' hearts. And yet balls are pleasant things at eighteen, and when two young creatures, quite deprived of such pleasures, turn their backs thus upon the enchanted place where the others are dancing, it would be strange if a touch of forlorn sentiment did not make itself felt in their hearts, though the soft falling of the dusk, and the hush of the great sea, and the salt air in their faces, gave them a pleasure, had they but known it, more exquisite than any mere ball, as a ball, ever confers. One only knows this, how-

ever, by reflection, never by immediate sensation; and so there was, as I have said, just a touch of pathos in their voices, and a sense of superiority, comfortable only in that it was superior, but slightly sad otherwise, in their hearts.

"I don't know what makes me go on thinking of home," said Cicely, after a pause. "If we had been at home we should have had more pleasure, Mab. The people about would have asked us—a clergyman's daughters always get asked; and there are very nice people about Brentburn, very different from the Robinsons and their class."

"We should have had no dresses to go in," said Mab. "How could we ever have had ball-dresses off papa's two hundred a year?"

"Ball-dresses sound something very grand, but a plain white tarlatan is not dear when one can make it up one's self.

However, that is a poor way of looking at it," said Cicely, giving a little toss to her head, as if to throw off such unelevated thoughts. "There are a great many more important things to think of. How will he ever manage to bring up the two boys?"

Mab made a pause of reflection. "To be sure Aunt Jane is not their relation," she said, "and boys are more troublesome than girls. They want to have tutors and things, and to go to the university; and then what is the good of it all if they are not clever? Certainly boys are far more troublesome than girls."

"And then, if you consider papa," said Cicely, "that he is not very strong, and that he is old. One does not like to say anything disagreeable about one's papa, but what *did* he want with those children? Surely we were quite enough when he is so poor."

"There is always one thing he can do," said Mab. "Everybody says he is a very good scholar. He will have to teach them himself."

"We shall have to teach them," said Cicely with energy; "I know so well that this is what it will come to. I don't mean to teach them ourselves, for it is not much Latin I know, and you none, and I have not a word of Greek—but they will come upon us, I am quite sure."

"You forget Mrs. St. John," said Mab.

Cicely gave a slight shrug of her shoulders, but beyond that she did not pursue the subject. Mrs. St. John's name stopped everything; they could not discuss her, nor express their disapprobation, and therefore they forbore religiously, though it was sometimes hard work.

"Blandina will think we are late," at last she said, turning round. This was their name for their former instructress,

their present employer. Mab turned dutifully, obeying her sister's touch, but with a faint sigh.

"I hope they will be quiet at the Robinsons as we are passing," the girl said. "What if they are in full swing, with the 'Blue Danube' perhaps! I hate to go in from a sweet night like this with noisy fiddles echoing through my head."

Cicely gave a slight squeeze of sympathy to her sister's arm. Do not you understand the girls, young reader? It was not the "Blue Danube" that was being played, but the old Lancers, the which to hear is enough to make wooden legs dance. Cicely and Mab pressed each other's arms, and glanced up at the window, where dancing shadows and figures were visible. They sighed, and they went into their garret, avoiding the tacit disapproval of Miss Blandy's good-night. She did not approve of twilight walks.

Why should they want to go out just then like the tradespeople, a thing which ladies never did? But if Miss Blandy had known that the girls were quite saddened by the sound of the music from the Robinsons', and yet could not sleep for listening to it, I fear she would have thought them very improper young persons indeed. She had forgotten how it felt to be eighteen—it was so long ago.

On the very next morning the news came of their stepmother's death. It was entirely unexpected by them, for they had no idea of the gradual weakness which had been stealing over that poor little woman, and they were moved by deep compunction as well as natural regret. It is impossible not to feel that we might have been kinder, might have made life happier to those that are gone—a feeling experienced the moment that we know them to be certainly gone, and inaccessible

to all kindness. "Oh, poor Mrs. St. John!" said Mab, dropping a few natural tears. Cicely was more deeply affected. She was the eldest and had thought the most; as for the young artist, her feeling ran into the tips of her fingers, and got expansion there; but Cicely had no such medium. She went about mournfully all day long, and in the evening Mab found her seated at the window of their attic, looking out with her eyes big with tears upon the darkening sea. When her sister touched her on the shoulder Cicely's tears fell. "Oh, poor Miss Brown!" she said, her heart having gone back to the time when they had no grievance against their kind little governess. "Oh, Mab, if one could only tell her how one was sorry! if she could only see into my heart now!"

"Perhaps she can," said Mab, awe-stricken and almost under her breath, lift-

ing her eyes to the clear wistful horizon in which the evening star had just risen.

"And one could have said it only yesterday!" said Cicely, realizing for the first time that mystery of absolute severance; and what light thoughts had been in their minds yesterday! Sighs for Alice Robinson's ball, depression of soul and spirit caused by the distant strains of the Lancers, and the "Blue Danube"—while this tragedy was going on, and the poor soul who had been good to them, but to whom they had not been good, was departing, altogether and for ever out of reach. Cicely in her sorrow blamed herself unjustly, as was natural, and mourned for the mystery of human shortsightedness as well as for Mrs. St. John. But I do not mean to say that this grief was very profound after the first sting, and after that startling impression of the impossibility of further intercourse was over.

The girls went out quietly in the afternoon, and bought black stuff to make themselves mourning, and spoke to each other in low voices and grave tones. Their youthful vigour was subdued—they were overawed to feel as it were the wings of the great Death-Angel overshadowing them. The very sunshine looked dim, and the world enveloped in a cloud. But it was within a week or two of Miss Blandy's "breaking up," and they could not go away immediately. Miss Blandy half audibly expressed her satisfaction that Mrs. St. John was only their stepmother. "Had she been their own mother, what should we have done?" she said. So that it was not till the end of July, when the establishment broke up, that the girls were at last able to get home.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GIRLS AT HOME.

We are so proud in England of having a word which means home, which some of our neighbours we are pleased to think have not, that, perhaps, it is a temptation to us to indulge in a general rapture over the word which has sometimes little foundation in reality. When Cicely and Mab walked to the rectory together from the station a suppressed excitement was in their minds. Since they first left for school, they had only come back for a few days each year, and they had not liked it. Their stepmother had been very kind, painfully kind; and anxious

above measure that they should find everything as they had left it, and should not be disappointed or dull; but this very anxiety had made an end of all natural ease, and they had been glad when the moment came that released them. Now, poor woman, she had been removed out of their way; they were going back to take care of their father as they might have done had there been no second Mrs. St. John; and everything was as it had been, with the addition of the two babies, innocent little intruders, whom the girls, you may be sure, could never find it in their hearts to be hard upon. Cicely and Mab took each others' hands instinctively as they left the station. It was the first of August, the very prime and glory of summer; the woods were at their fullest, untouched by any symptom of decay. The moorland side of the landscape was more wealthy

and glorious still in its flush of heather. The common was not indeed one sheet of purple, like a Scotch moor; but it was all lighted up between the gorse bushes with fantastic streaks and bands of colour blazing in the broad sunshine, and haunted by swarms of bees which made a hum in the air almost as sweet and all-pervading as the murmur of the sea. As they drew near the house their hearts began to beat louder. Would there be any visible change upon it? Would it look as it did when they were children, or with that indefinable difference which showed in *her* time? They did not venture to go the familiar way by the garden, but walked up solemnly like visitors to the front door. It was opened to them by a new maid, whom they had never seen before, and who demurred slightly to giving them admittance. "Master ain't in," said the girl; "yes,

miss, I know as you're expected," but still she hesitated. This was not the kind of welcome which the daughters of a house generally receive. They went in to the house nevertheless, Betsy following them. The blinds were drawn low over the windows, which were all shut; and though the atmosphere was stifling with heat, yet it was cold, miserably cold to Cicely and Mab. Their father's study was the only place that had any life in it. The rectory seemed full of nothing but old black heavy furniture, and heavier memories of some chilled and faded past.

"What a dreadful old place it is," said Mab; "it is like coming home to one's grave," and she sat down on the black haircloth easy-chair and shivered and cried; though this was coming home, to the house in which she had been born.

"Now it will be better," said Cicely

pulling up the blinds and opening the window. She had more command of herself than her sister. She let the sunshine come down in a flood across the dingy carpet, worn with the use of twenty years.

"Please, miss," said Betsy interposing, "missis would never have the blinds up in this room 'cause of spoiling the carpet. If master says so, I don't mind; but till he do——" and here Betsy put up her hand to the blind.

"Do you venture to meddle with what my sister does?" cried Mab, furious, springing from her chair.

Cicely only laughed. "You are a good girl to mind what your mistress said, but we are your mistresses now; you must let the window alone, for don't you see the carpet is spoiled already? I will answer to papa. What is it? Do you want anything more?"

"Only this, miss," said Betsy, "as it's the first laugh as has been heard here for weeks and weeks, and I don't like it neither, seeing as missis is in her grave only a fortnight to-day."

"I think you are a very good girl," said Cicely: and with that the tears stood in that changeable young woman's eyes.

No Betsy that ever was heard of could long resist this sort of treatment. "I tries to be, miss," she said with a curtsy and a whimper. "Maybe you'd like a cup of tea?" and after following them suspiciously all over the house, she left them at last on this hospitable intent in the fading drawing-room, where they had both enshrined the memory of their mother. Another memory was there now, a memory as faded as the room, which showed in all kinds of feeble feminine decorations, bits of modern lace, and worked cushions and foolish foot-

stools. The room was all pinafored and transmogrified, the old dark picture-frames covered with yellow gauze, and the needlework in crackling semi-transparent covers.

"This was how she liked things, poor soul! Oh, Mab," cried Cicely, "how strange that she should die!"

"No stranger than that any one else should die," said Mab, who was more matter of fact.

"A great deal stranger! It was not strange at all that little Mary Seymour should die. One saw it in her eyes; she was like an angel; it was natural; but poor Miss Brown, who was quite happy working cushions and covering them up, and keeping the sun off the carpets, and making lace for the brackets! It looks as if there was so little sense or method in it," said Cicely. "She won't have any cushions to work up there."

"I dare say there won't be anything to draw up there," said Mab; "and yet I suppose I shall die too in time."

"When there are the four walls for Leonardo, and Michel Angelo and Raphael and poor Andrea," said the other. "How you forget! Besides, it is quite different. Hark! what was that?" she cried, putting up her hand.

What it was soon became very distinctly evident—a feeble little cry speedily joined by another, and then a small weak chorus, two voices entangled together. "No, no; no ladies. Harry no like ladies," mixed with a whimpering appeal to "papa, papa."

"Come and see the pretty ladies. Harry never saw such pretty ladies," said the encouraging voice of Betsy in the passage.

The girls looked at each other, and grew red. They had made up their

minds about a great many things, but never how they were to deal with the two children. Then Betsy appeared at the door, pushing it open before her with the tea-tray she carried. To her skirts were hanging two little boys, clinging to her, yet resisting her onward motion, and carried on by it in spite of themselves. They stared at the new-comers with big blue eyes wide open, awed into silence. They were very small and very pale, with light colourless limp locks falling over their little black dresses. The girls on their side stared silently too. There was not a feature in the children's faces which resembled their elder sisters. They were both little miniatures of Miss Brown.

"So these are the children," said Cicely, making a reluctant step forward; to which Harry and Charley responded by a renewed clutch at Betsy's dress.

"Yes, miss; them's the children! and darlings they be," said Betsy, looking fondly at them as she set down the tea. Cicely made another step forward slowly, and held out her hands to them; when the little boys set up a scream which rang through the house, and hiding their faces simultaneously in Betsy's gown, howled to be taken away. Mab put up her hands to her ears, but Cicely, more anxious to do her duty, made another attempt. She stooped down and kissed, or tried to kiss the little tear-stained faces, to which caress each small brother replied by pushing her away with a repeated roar.

"Don't you take no notice, miss. Let em alone and they'll get used to you in time," said Betsy.

"Go away, go away! Harry no like 'oo," screamed the spokesman brother. No one likes to be repulsed even by a

child. Cicely stumbled to her feet very red and uncomfortable. She stood ruefully looking after them as they were carried off after a good preliminary "shake," one in each of Betsy's red hands.

"There is our business in life," she said in a solemn tone. "Oh, Mab, Mab, what did papa want with these children? All the trouble of them will come on you and me."

Mab looked at her sister with a look of alarm, which changed, however, into laughter at sight of Cicely's solemn looks and the dreary presentiment in her face.

"You are excellent like that," she said; "and if you had only seen how funny you all looked when the little demons began to cry. They will do for models at all events, and I'll take to painting children. They say it's very

good practice, and nursery pictures always sell."

These lighter suggestions did not, however, console Cicely. She walked about the room with clasped hands and a very serious face, neglecting her tea.

"Papa will never trouble himself about them," she said half to herself; "it will all fall on Mab and me. And boys! that they should be boys. We shall never be rich enough to send them to the University. Girls we might have taught ourselves; but when you think of Oxford and Cambridge——"

"We can't tell," said Mab; "how do you know I shan't turn out a great painter, and be able to send them wherever you like? for I am the brother and you are the sister, Ciss. You are to keep my house and have the spending of all my money. So don't be gloomy, please, but pour out some tea. I wish, though, they were not quite so plain."

"So like their mother," said Cicely with a sigh.

"And so disagreeable; but it is funny to hear one speak for both as if the two were Harry. I am glad they are not girls. To give them a share of all we have I don't mind; but to teach them! with those white little pasty faces——"

"One can do anything when one makes up one's mind to it," said Cicely with a sigh.

At this moment the hall door opened, and after an interval Mr. St. John came in with soft steps. He had grown old in these last years; bowed down with age and troubles. He came up to his daughters and kissed them, laying his hand upon their heads.

"I am very glad you have come home," he said, in a voice which was pathetic in its feebleness. "You are all I have now."

"Not all you have, papa," said Mab; "we have just seen the little boys."

A momentary colour flushed over his pale face. "Ah, the babies," he said. "I am afraid they will be a great deal of trouble to you, my dears."

Cicely and Mab looked at each other, but they did not say anything—they were afraid to say something which they ought not to say. And what could he add after that? He took the cup of tea they offered him, and drank it standing, his tall frame with a stoop in it, which was partly age and partly weakness, coming against one tall window and shutting out the light. "But that you are older looking," he said at last, "all this time might seem like a dream."

"A sad dream, papa," said Cicely, not knowing what to say.

"I cannot say that, my dear. I thank

God I have had a great deal of happiness in my life; because we are sad for the moment we must not forget to thank Him for all His mercies," said Mr. St. John; and then with a change in his voice, he added, "Your aunt sends me word that she is coming soon to see you. She is a very strong woman for her years; I look older than she does; and it is a trouble to me now to go to town and back in one day."

"You have not been ill, papa?"

"No, Cicely, not ill; a little out of my usual," he said, "that is all. Now you are here, we shall fall into our quiet way again. The changes God sends we must accept; but the little worries are trying, my dear. I am getting old, and am not so able to brave them; but all will be well now you are here."

"We shall do all we can," said Cicely; "but you must remember, papa, we are

not used to housekeeping, and if we make mistakes at first——"

"I am not afraid of your mistakes," said Mr. St. John, looking at her with a faint smile. He had scarcely looked full at her before, and his eyes dwelt upon her face with a subdued pleasure. "You are your mother over again," he said. "You will be a blessing to me, Cicely, as she was."

The two girls looked at him strangely, with a flood of conflicting thoughts. How dared he speak of their mother? Was he relieved to be able to think of their mother without Miss Brown coming in to disturb his thoughts? If natural reverence had not restrained them, what a cross-examination they would have put him to! but as it was, their eager thoughts remained unsaid. "I will do all I can, papa, and so will Mab," said Cicely, faltering. And he put down his

cup, and said, "God bless you, my dears," and went to his study as if they had never been absent at all, only out perhaps, as Mab said, for a rather long walk.

"I don't think he can have cared for her," said Cicely; "he is glad to get back to the idea of mamma; I am sure that is what he means. He is always kind, and of course he was kind to her; but there is a sort of relief in his tone—a sort of ease."

"That is all very well for us," said Mab; "but if you will think of it, it seems a little hard on poor Miss Brown."

This staggered Cicely, who loved justice. "But I think she should not have married him," she said. "It was easy to see that anybody could have married him who wished. I can see that now, though I never thought of it then. And, kind as it was of Aunt Jane, perhaps we should

not have left him unprotected. You ought to have gone to school, Mab, because of your talent, and I should have stayed at home."

They decided, however, after a few minutes, that it was needless to discuss this possibility now, so long after it had become an impossibility. And then they went upstairs to take off their travelling-dresses and make themselves feel at home. When they came down again, with their hair smooth, Cicely carrying her work-basket and Mab her sketch-book, and seated themselves in the old faded room, from which the sunshine had now slid away, as the sun got westward, a bewildered feeling took possession of them. Had they ever been absent? had anything happened since that day when Aunt Jane surprised them in their pinafores? The still house, so still in the deep tranquillity of the country, after

the hum of their schoolroom life and the noises of a town, seemed to turn round with them, as they looked out upon the garden, upon which no change seemed to have passed. "I declare," cried Mab, "there is exactly the same number of apples—and the same branch of that old-plum-tree hanging loose from the wall!"

Thus the first evening passed like a dream. Mr. St. John came from his study to supper, and he talked a little, just as he had been in the habit of talking long ago, without any allusion to the past. He told them a few pieces of news about the parish, and that he would like them to visit the school. "It has been very well looked after lately," he said. Perhaps this meant by his wife—perhaps it did not; the girls could not tell. Then Betsy came in for prayers, along with a small younger sister of hers who had charge of the little boys; and by ten

o'clock, as at Miss Blandy's, the door was locked, and the peaceful house wrapped in quiet. The girls looked out of their window upon the soft stillness with the strangest feelings. The garden paths were clearly indicated by a feeble veiled moon, and the trees which thickened in clouds upon the horizon. There was not a sound anywhere in the tranquil place except the occasional bark of that dog, who somewhere, far or near, always indicates existence in a still night in the country. The stillness fell upon their souls. "He never asked what we were going to do," said Mab, for they were silenced too, and spoke to each other only now and then, chilled out of the superabundance of their own vitality. "But he thinks with me that the children are to be our business in life," said Cicely, and then they went to bed, taking refuge in the darkness. For two girls so

full of conscious life, tingling to the finger, points with active faculties and power, it was a chilly home-coming, yet not so unusual either. When the young creatures come home, with their new lives in their hands to make something of, for good or evil, do not we often expect them to settle down to the level of the calm old lives which are nearly worn out, and find fault with them if it is a struggle? Mr. St. John felt that it was quite natural his girls should come home and keep his house for him, and take the trouble of the little boys, and visit the schools—so naturally that when he had said, "Now you are here, we shall fall into our quiet way again," it seemed to him that everything was said that needed to be said.

In the morning the children were found less inaccessible, and made friends with by dint of lumps of sugar and bits of

toast, of which Mab was prodigal. They were very tiny, delicate, and colourless, with pale hair and pale eyes; but they were not wanting in some of the natural attractions of children. Charley was the backward one, and had little command of language. Harry spoke for both; and I will not say it was easy for these girls, unaccustomed to small children, to understand even him. Mr. St. John patted their heads and gave them a smile each by way of blessing; but he took little further notice of the children. "I believe Annie, the little maid, is very kind to them," he said. "I cannot bear to hear them crying, my dears; but now you are here all will go well."

"But, papa," said Cicely, "will it be right for us to stay at home, when you have them to provide for, and there is so little money?"

"Right for you to stay? Where could

you be so well as at home?" said the curate, perturbed. The girls looked at each other, and this time it was Mab who was bold, and ventured to speak.

"Papa, it is not that. Supposing that we are best at home" (Mab said this with the corners of her mouth going down, for it was not her own opinion), "yet there are other things to consider. We should be earning something——"

Mr. St. John got up almost impatiently for him. "I have never been left to want," he said. "I have been young, and now I am old, but I have never seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread. Providence will raise up friends for the children; and we have always had plenty. If there is enough for me, there is enough for you."

And he went out of the room as nearly angry as it was possible for his mild nature to be. Cicely and Mab once more

looked at each other wondering. "Papa is crazy, I think," said Mab, who was the most self-assertive; but Cicely only heaved a sigh, and went out to the hall to brush his hat for him, as she remembered her mother used to do. Mr. St. John liked this kind of tendance. "You are a good girl, Cicely; you are just such another as your mother," he said, as he took the hat from her; and Cicely divined that the late Mrs. St. John had not shown him this attention, which I think pleased her on the whole.

"But, papa, I am afraid Mab was right," she said. "You must think it over, and think what is best for Mab."

"Why should she be different from you?" said Mr. St. John, feeling in his breast pocket for the familiar prayer-book which lay there. It was more important to him to make sure it was safe, than to decide what to do with his child.

"I don't know why, but we *are* different. Dear papa, you must think, if you please, what is best."

"It is nonsense, Cicely; she must stay where she is, and make herself happy. A good girl is always happy at home," said Mr. St. John; "and, of course, there is plenty—plenty for all of us. You must not detain me, my dear, nor talk about business this first morning. Depend upon it," said Mr. St. John, raising his soft, feeble hand to give emphasis to his words, "it is always best for you to be at home."

What a pity that children and women are not always convinced when the head of the house thus lays down the law! Cicely went back into the dining-room where they had breakfasted, shaking her head, without being aware of the gesture. "Why should I depend upon it?" she said. "Depend upon it! I may be quite

willing to do it, for it is my duty; but why should I depend upon it as being the best?"

"What are you saying, Cicely?"

"Nothing, dear; only papa is rather odd. Does he think that two hundred a year is a great fortune? or that two of us, and two of them, and two maids (though they are little ones), and himself, can get on upon two hundred a year?"

"I must paint," said Mab; "I must paint! I'll tell you what I shall do. You are a great deal more like a Madonna than most of the women who have sat for her. I will paint a Holy Family from you and *them*—— They are funny little pale things, but we could light them up with a little colour; and they are *real* babies, you know," Mab said, looking at them seriously, with her head on one side, as becomes a painter. She had posed the two children on the floor: the

one seated firmly with his little legs stretched out, the other leaning against him; while she walked up and down, with a pencil in her hand, studying them. "Stay still a moment longer, and I will give you a lump of sugar," she said.

"Harry like sugar," said the small spokesman, looking up at her. Charley said nothing. He had his thumb, and half the little hand belonging to it, in his mouth, and sucked it with much philosophy. "Or perhaps I might make you a peasant woman," said Mab, "with one of them on your back. They are nature, Ciss. You know how Mr. Lake used to go on, saying nature was what I wanted. Well, here it is."

"I think you are as mad as papa," said Cicely, impatient; "but I must order the dinner and look after the things. That's nature for me. Oh, dear—oh, dear! We shall not long be able to have

any dinner, if we go on with such a lot of servants. Two girls, two boys, two maids, and two hundred a year! You might as well try to fly," said Cicely, shaking her pretty head.

CHAPTER VII.

NEWS.

Perhaps it had been premature of the girls to speak to their father of their future, and what they were to do, on the very first morning after their return; but youth is naturally impatient, and the excitement of one crisis seems to stimulate the activity of all kinds of plans and speculations in the youthful brain; and then perhaps the chill of the house, the rural calm of the place, had frightened them. Cicely, indeed, knew it was her duty and her business to stay here, whatever happened; but how could Mab bear

it, she said to herself—Mab, who required change and novelty, whose mind was full of such hopes of seeing and of doing? When their father had gone out, however, they threw aside their grave thoughts for the moment, and dawdled the morning away, roaming about the garden, out and in a hundred times, as it is so pleasant to do on a summer day in the country, especially to those who find in the country the charm of novelty. They got the children's hats, and took them out to play on the sunny grass, and run small races along the paths.

"Please, miss, not to let them run too much," said little Annie, Betsy's sister, who was the nurse, though she was but fifteen. "Please, miss, not to let 'em roll on the grass."

"Why, the grass is as dry as the carpet; and what are their little legs good for but to run with?" said Cicely.

Whereupon little Annie made up a solemn countenance, and said, "Please, miss, I promised missis——"

Mab rushed off with the children before the sentence was completed. That's why they are so pale," cried the impetuous girl; "poor little white-faced things! But we never promised missis. Let us take them into our own hands."

"You are a good girl to remember what your mistress said," said Cicely with dignity, walking out after her sister in very stately fashion. And she reproved Mab for her rashness, and led the little boys about, promenading the walks. "We must get rid of these two maids," she said, "or we shall never be allowed to have anything our own way."

"But you said they were good girls for remembering," said Mab, surprised.

"So they were; but that is not to say I am going to put up with it," said

Cicely, drawing herself to her full height, and looking Miss St. John, as Mab asserted she was very capable of doing when she pleased.

"You are very funny, Cicely," said the younger sister; "you praise the maids, and yet you want to get rid of them; and you think what 'missis' made them promise is nonsense, yet there you go walking about with these two mites as if you had promised missis yourself."

"Hush!" said Cicely, and then the tears came into her eyes. "She is dead!" said this inconsistent young woman, with a low voice full of remorse. "It would be hard if one did not give in to her at first about her own little boys."

After this dawdling in the morning, they made up their minds to work in the afternoon. Much as they loved the

sunshine, they were obliged to draw down the blinds with their own hands, to the delight of Betty, to whom Cicely was obliged to explain that this was not to save the carpet. It is difficult to know what to do in such circumstances, especially when there is nothing particular to be done. It was too hot to go out; and as for beginning needlework in cold blood the first day you are in a new place, or have come back to an old one, few girls of eighteen and nineteen are so virtuous as that. One thing afforded them a little amusement, and that was to pull things about, and alter their arrangement, and shape the room to their own mind. Cicely took down a worked banner-screen which hung from the mantelpiece, and which offended her fastidious taste; or rather, she began to unscrew it, removing first the crackling semi-transparent veil that covered it.

"Why did she cover them up so?" cried Cicely, impatiently.

"To keep them clean, of course," said Mab.

"But why should they be kept clean? We are obliged to fade and lose our beauty. It is unnatural to be spick and span, always clean and young, and new. Come down, you gaudy thing!" she cried. Then with her hand still grasping it, a compunction seized her. "After all, why shouldn't she leave something behind her—something to remember her by? She had as much right here as we have, after all. She ought to leave some trace of her existence here."

"She has left her children—trace enough of her existence!" cried Mab.

Cicely was struck by this argument. She hesitated a minute, with her hand on the screen, then hastily detached it, and threw it down. Then two offensive

cushions met her eye, which she put in the same heap. "The little boys might like to have them when they grow up," she added, half apologetically, to herself.

And with these changes something of the old familiar look began to come into the faded room. Mab had brought out her drawing things, but the blinds were fluttering over the open windows, shutting out even the garden; and there was nothing to draw. And it was afternoon, which is not a time to begin work. She fixed her eyes upon a large chiffonier, with glass doors, which held the place of honour in the room. It was mahogany, like everything else in the house.

"I wonder what sort of a man Mr. Chester is?" she said; "or what he meant by buying all that hideous furniture—a man who lives in Italy, and is an antiquary, and knows about pictures.

If it was not for the glass doors, how like a hearse that chiffonier would be. I mean a catafalque. What is a catafalque, Cicely? A thing that is put up in churches when people are dead? I hope Mr. Chester when he dies will have just such a tomb."

"It is not so bad as the big bookcase in the study," said Cicely; "certainly things are better now-a-days. If I had plenty of money, how I should like to furnish this room all over again, with bright young things, not too huge; little sofas that would move anywhere when you touched them, and soft chairs. They should be covered in amber——"

"No—blue!" cried Mab.

"Soft amber—amber with a bloom of white in it——"

"In this sunny room," cried Mab. "What are you thinking of? No; it must be a cool colour—a sort of moon-

lighty blue—pale, pale; or tender fairy green."

"What is fairy green? Amber is my colour—it would be lovely; of course I don't mean to say it wouldn't fade. But then if one were rich the pleasure would be to let it fade, and then have all the fun over again, and choose another," said Cicely, with a sigh over this impossible delight.

"Things sometimes improve by fading," said the artist. "I like the faded tints—they harmonize. Hush, Cicely! —oh, stop your tidying—there is some one at the door."

"It cannot be any one coming to call so soon?" said Cicely, startled.

"But it is—listen! I can hear Betsy saying, 'This way, ma'am; this way.'" And Mab closed her sketch-book, and sat very upright and expectant on her chair; while Cicely, throwing (I am

ashamed to say) her spoils under a sofa, took up her needlework by the wrong end, and, putting on a portentous face of gravity and absorbed occupation, waited for the expected visitor.

A moment after the door was flung open, but not by Betsy; and Miss Maydew, flushed with her walk from the station, as when they had first seen her, with the same shawl on, and I almost think the same bonnet (but that was impossible), stood before them, her large white handkerchief in her hand. She was too hot to say anything, but dropped down on the first chair she came to, leaving the door open, which made a draught, and blew about her ribbons violently. "I know it is as much as my life is worth," said Miss Maydew; "but, oh, how delicious it is to be in a draught!"

"Aunt Jane!" the girls cried, and

rushed at her with unfeigned relief. They were more familiar with her now than they had been four years ago. They took off her great shawl for her, and loosed her bonnet strings. "Papa told us you were coming," they cried; "but we did not hope for you so soon. How kind of you to come to-day."

"Oh, my dears," said Aunt Jane, "I did not mean to come to-day; I came to see how you were taking it; and what your papa means to do. As soon as I saw it in the paper I thought, oh my poor, poor children, and that helpless old man! What are they to do?"

"Do you mean about Mrs. St. John?" said Cicely, growing grave. "Papa is very composed and kind, and indeed I can do all he wants. Aunt Jane——"

"About Mrs. St. John? Poor woman, I have nothing to say against her—but she is taken away from the evil to come,"

said Miss Maydew. "No, no, it was not about Mrs. St. John I was thinking, it was about something much more serious. Not that anything could be more serious than a death; but in a worldly point of view!"

"What is it?" they both said in a breath. The idea of news was exciting to them, even though, as was evident from their visitor's agitation, it was disagreeable news they were about to hear. Miss Maydew drew with much excitement from her pocket a copy of the *Times*, very tightly folded together to enable it to enter there, and opened it with trembling hands.

"There it is! Oh, my poor, poor children! imagine my feelings—it was the very first thing I saw when I took up my paper this morning," she said.

The girls did not immediately take in he full meaning of the intimation which

they read with two startled faces close together over the old lady's shoulder. "At Castellamare, on the 15th July, the Rev. Edward Chester, Rector of Brentburn, Berks."

"But we don't know him," said Mab, bewildered.

Cicely, I think, had a remark of the same kind on her lips; but she stopped suddenly and clasped her hands together and gave a low cry.

"Ah, *you* understand, Cicely!" said Miss Maydew, wiping her forehead with her handkerchief; "now let us consult what is to be done. What is the date? I was so agitated I never thought of the date! The 15th. Oh, my dear, here is a fortnight lost!"

"But what can be done?" said Cicely, turning a pathetic glance upon the old room which had seemed so melancholy to her yesterday, and the tons of mahogany

which she had just been criticising. How kind, and friendly, and familiar they had become all at once; old, dear friends, who belonged to her no more.

"Mr. Chester, the rector!" said Mab, with sudden apprehension. "Do you mean that something will happen to papa?"

"There is this to be done," said the old lady, "your poor good father has been here for twenty years; the people ought to be fond of him—I do not know whether they are, for a parish is an incomprehensible thing, as your poor dear grandfather always used to say—but they ought to be; I am sure he has trudged about enough, and never spared himself, though I never thought him a good preacher, so far as that goes. But he ought to have a great many friends after living here for twenty years."

"But, Aunt Jane, tell us, tell us—what good will that do?"

"It might do a great deal if they would exert themselves. They might get up a petition, for instance—at once—to the Lord Chancellor; they might employ all their influence. It is not a rich parish, nor a large parish, but there are always gentry in it. Oh, a great deal might be done if only people would exert themselves! It is dreadful to think that a fortnight has been lost."

Cicely, who was not much consoled by this hope, sat down with a very pale countenance and a sudden constriction at her heart. She was almost too much bewildered to realize all that it meant; enough lay on the surface to fill her soul with dismay. Mab, who had less perception of the urgent character of the calamity, was more animated.

"I thought you meant *we* could do something," she said. "Oh, Aunt Jane, could not we go to the Chancellor, if

that is the man. The parish? I don't see why they should take the trouble. It will not hurt them. They will have a young, well-off man instead of an old, poor man. Couldn't *we* go to the Lord Chancellor, Aunt Jane?"

Miss Maydew's eyes lighted up for a moment. She seemed to see herself approaching that unknown potentate as lovely ladies went to kings in the days of romance, with a child in each hand. She felt how eloquent she could be, how convincing. She felt herself capable of going down on her knees and asking him whether the father of those two sweet girls was to starve in his old age? All this appeared before her like a dream. But alas! common sense soon resumed its sway; she shook her head. "I don't know if that would do any good," she said.

"And *we* could not get up a petition

from the parish," said Cicely; "whatever the people may do we cannot stir in it. Oh, Aunt Jane, how foolish, how wrong of us never to think of this! I have thought that papa was old and that we should have to maintain ourselves and the two babies if—anything happened; but I never remembered that it all hung upon some one else's life. Oh, it does seem hard!" cried the girl, clasping her hands. "Papa has done all the work since ever I was born, but yet he has only been here on sufferance, ready to be turned out at a moment's notice. Oh, it is wrong, it is wrong!"

"Not exactly at a moment's notice," said Miss Maydew; "there is six weeks or three months, or something, I forget how long."

And then there was a painful pause. Mab cried a little, having her feelings most upon the surface, but Cicely sat

quite silent and pale with her eyes fixed upon the white blinds which flapped against the open windows. All at once she got up and drew one of them up with a rapid impatient hand. "I want air, I want light," she said in a stifled voice, and put herself full in the intrusive sunshine, which made Miss Maydew blink her old eyes.

"You will give yourself a headache, my dear, and that will not mend matters," she said.

Cicely's heart was very heavy. She drew down the blind again and walked up and down the room in her agitation. "Five of us to provide for now—and that is not the worst; what is papa to do? How can he live with everything taken from him? Oh, go to the Chancellor, or any one, if it will do any good! It is terrible for papa."

It was while they were still in this

agitated state that Betsy threw open the door again, and Mrs. Ascott, of the Heath, one of the greatest ladies in the parish, came in. She was not heated, like poor old Miss Maydew, with walking, but fresh and well dressed from her carriage, and tranquil as prosperity and comfort could make her. The girls made that sudden effort, which women so often have to make, to receive her as if nothing had happened, as if their minds were as easy and their circumstances as agreeable as her own. She inquired about their journey, about their school, about how they found their papa looking, about the "sad trials" he had gone through, all in a sweet even tone, with smiles or serious looks, as became her words, and hoped that now they had come back she should see them often at the Heath. "You are the musical one, Cicely," she said; "I know Mab draws. It is always

nice when sisters have each their distinction, that people can't mistake. My husband always says girls are so like each other. What is your voice? contralto? oh, a good second is such a want here. We are all more or less musical, you know."

"My voice is not much one way or the other," said Cicely. "Mab sings better than I do, though she is the one who draws."

"But I fear," said Miss Maydew, clearing her throat and interfering, "unless something is done they will not be here long to be of use to any one. We have just had news——"

"Ah, about poor Mr. Chester," said Mrs. Ascott, with the slightest of glances at the stranger; "I saw it in the papers. Will that affect your papa?"

"Unless"—Miss Maydew put herself forward squarely and steadily—"something is done."

Mrs. Ascott looked at the old lady for the first time. She had thought her an old nurse at first—for the good woman was not of a patrician appearance, like the girls, who were St. Johns. "Unless —something is done? I am sure we will all do anything that is possible. What can be done?"

"Hush! my dear, hush! She does not know I belong to you," whispered Miss Maydew. "I think a great deal might be done. If Mr. St. John's friends were to get up a petition to the Lord Chancellor at once—stating how long he had been here, and how much beloved he was, and the whole state of the case. I don't personally know his lordship," said the old lady; "but he can't be a bad man or he never would have risen to that position. I can't believe but what if the case were put fully before him, he would give Mr. St. John the

living. It seems so much the most natural thing to do."

"Dear me, so it does!" said Mrs. Ascott. "How clever of you to have thought of it. I will speak to my husband, and see what he says."

"And if there is any one else whom you can influence—to do good it should be general—from the whole parish," said Miss Maydew—"from all classes; and it ought to be done at once."

"To be sure," said Mrs. Ascott. "I assure you I will speak to my husband." She got up to take her leave, a little frightened by the vehemence of the stranger, and rather elated at the same time by the sense of having a mission. Miss Maydew went with her to the very door.

"At once," she said, "at once! It is a fortnight already since the rector died. If the parish means to do anything, you should not lose a day."

"No: I see, I see! I will go at once and speak to my husband," cried the visitor, escaping hastily. Miss Maydew returned to her seat breathing a sigh of satisfaction. "There, girls! I have set it agoing at least. I have started it. That was a nice woman—if she exerts herself, I don't doubt that it will be all right. What a blessing she came while I was here."

"I hope it is all right," said Cicely doubtfully; "but she is not very——not very, *very* sensible, you know. But she is always kind. I hope she will not do anything foolish. Is that papa she is talking to?" cried the girl alarmed, for there were sounds of commotion in the hall. A silence fell upon even the chief conspirator, when she felt that Mr. St. John was near—the possibility that her tactics might not be quite satisfactory alarmed her. She withdrew into a

corner, instinctively getting the girls and a considerable mass of furniture between herself and any one coming in at the door.

"I do not know what Mrs. Ascott is talking of," said the curate. "Is tea ready, my dear, for I have a great deal to do? What have you been putting into that good woman's head? She is talking of a petition, and of the Lord Chancellor, and of bad news. I hope you are not a politician, Cicely. What is it all about?"

"Here is Aunt Jane, papa," said Cicely, who was not more comfortable than Miss Maydew. And the old lady had to get up and stretch out her hand to Mr. St. John over the sofa, which was her bulwark in chief.

"But I wonder what she meant about bad news," he went on; "she seemed to think it affected us. My dears, have you heard anything?"

"Oh, papa, very bad news," said Cicely with tears in her eyes. "It is in the paper. Mrs. Ascott has seen it, and that is what we were talking about. Oh, dear papa, don't be cast down. Perhaps it may not be so bad as we think. Something may be done; or at the very worst we are both able and willing to work—Mab and I."

"I don't know what you mean," said Mr. St. John, and he read the announcement without much change of countenance. "Dear me, so he is gone at last!" he said. "I have long expected this. His health has been getting worse and worse for years. Poor Chester! has he really gone at last? I remember him at college. He was a year younger than I, but always sickly. Poor fellow! and he was a great deal better off than I am, but never got the good of it. What a lesson it is, my dears!"

"But, oh, papa," cried Mab, who was the most impatient, "it is a great deal more than a lesson. Think what consequences it will bring to you—and us—and everybody."

He looked at her with a half smile. "Little Mab," he said, "teaching her elders. Harry will begin soon. Yes, to be sure; we have got fond of this place; it seems hard that we should have to go."

"But, papa, where shall we go? What shall we do? What is to become of us?" said Cicely.

Mr. St. John shook his head. "If you will consider that I have only just seen it this moment," he said, "you will see that I cannot be expected all at once—— Was this what Mrs. Ascott was talking of? And what did she mean by petitions, and the Lord Chancellor? I hope you have not been putting anything into her head?"

There was a pause—the girls looked at each other, and blushed as if they were the culprits; then Miss Maydew came boldly to the front. "It was not the fault of the girls, Mr. St. John; on the contrary, they were against it. But I thought there was no harm in saying that a petition from the parish—to the Lord Chancellor—a well signed petition, as there must be so many people here who are fond of you—and that no doubt he would give you the living if he understood the circumstances."

"I a beggar for a living!" said Mr. St. John. "I who have never asked for anything in my life!" A deep flush came upon his delicate pale face. He had borne a great many more serious blows without wincing. Death had visited him, and care dwelt in his house—and he had borne these visitations placidly; but there was one flaw in his armour, and this un-

looked-for assault found it out. A flame of injured pride blazed up in him, swift as fire and as glowing. "I thought I should have died without this," he said with a groan, half fierce, half bitter. "What was it to you? I never asked you for anything! Oh, this is hard—this is very hard to bear."

In the memory of man it had never been known that Mr. St. John thus complained before. The girls had never heard his voice raised or seen the flush of anger on his face; and they were overawed by it. This kind of sentiment too has always a certain fictitious grandeur to the inexperienced. Never to ask for anything; to wait—patient merit scorning all conflict with the unworthy—till such time as its greatness should be acknowledged. This sounds very sublime in most cases to the youthful soul,

"Well, Mr. St. John," said Miss May-

dew, "you may say I have no right to interfere; but if you had stooped to ask for something it might have been a great deal better for your family. Besides, you have not asked for anything now. I am not responsible for my actions to any one, and I hope I may do either for you or anybody else whatever I please in the way of service. If the Lord Chancellor does give you the living——"

Mr. St. John smiled. "I need not make myself angry," he said, "for it is all sheer ignorance. The living is a college living. I don't know what your ideas are on the subject, but the Lord Chancellor has as much to do with it as you have. Cicely, let us have tea."

Miss Maydew shrivelled up upon her chair. She sat very quiet, and did not say a word after this revelation. What she had done would have troubled her mind little; but that she had done

nothing after risking so much was hard to bear. After this little ebullition, however, the curate fell back into his usual calm. He spoke to them in his ordinary way. His voice resumed its tranquil tone. He took his tea, which was a substantial meal, doing justice to the bread and butter, and on the whole showed signs of being more concerned for Mr. Chester than he was for himself.

"I remember him at college—we were of the same college," he said; "but he always the richest, much the best off. How little that has to say to a man's happiness! Poor Chester was never happy; he might have been very well here. How much I have had to be thankful for here! but it was not his disposition. He was good-looking too when he was young, and did very well in everything. Any one would have said he had a far better chance for a happy life than I had."

The gentle old man grew quite loquacious in this contrast, though he was in general the most humble-minded of men; and the two girls sat and listened, giving wondering glances at each other, and blushing red with that shame of affection which lively girls perhaps are particularly disposed to feel when their parents maunder. This sort of domestic criticism, even though unexpressed, was hard upon Mr. St. John, as upon all such feeble good men. His last wife had adored him at all times, as much when he was foolish as when he was wise. She would have given him the fullest adhesion of her soul now, and echoed every word he said; but the girls did not. They would have preferred to silence him, and were ashamed of his gentle self-complacency. And yet it was quite true that he felt himself a happier man than Mr. Chester, and higher in the scale of merit though not

of fortune; and the calm with which he took this event, which was neither more nor less than ruin to him, was fine in its way.

"But what are we to do, papa?" Cicely ventured to ask him, looking up into his face with big anxious eyes, as he took his last cup of tea.

"My dear, we must wait and see," he said. "There is no very immediate hurry. Let us see first who is appointed, and what the new rector intends to do."

"But, Mr. St. John, you are a very learned man—and if it is a college living" —suggested Miss Maydew.

"It is my own college, too," he said reflectively; "and I suppose I am now one of the oldest members of it. It would not be amiss if they let me stay here the rest of my days. But I never was distinguished. I never was a Fellow, or anything. I never could push myself

forward. No—we must just wait and see what is going to happen. A few days or a few weeks will make little difference. Compose yourselves, my dears," said Mr. St. John. "I am not very anxious after all."

"I wonder if he would be anxious if you were all starving," cried Miss Maydew, as the girls walked with her to the station in the evening. "Oh, Cicely, I know I oughtn't to say anything to you about your papa. But if he has not been anxious, others have been anxious for him. Your poor mother! how she slaved to keep everything as it ought to be; and even poor Miss Brown. It did not cost him much to marry her—but it cost her her life."

"Aunt Jane!" cried both the girls indignant.

"Well, my dears! She might have been living now, a respectable single

woman, doing her duty, as she was capable of doing; instead of which what must she do but bring a couple of white-faced babies into the world that nobody wanted, and die of it. Yes, she did die of it. You don't understand these things—you are only children. And all because he was what you call kind-hearted, and could not bear to see her cry, forsooth. As if the best of us were not obliged both to cry ourselves and to see others cry often enough! but they never thought what they were doing; and the ones to suffer will be you."

"Aunt Jane, you ought not to speak so of papa."

"I know I shouldn't, my dear—and I humbly beg your pardons," said Aunt Jane, drying her eyes.

"And we ought not to have left him unprotected," said Cicely, with a sigh.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW RECTOR.

The news which so much disturbed the inhabitants of the rectory at Brentburn was already old news in Oxford, where indeed it was known and decided who Mr. Chester's successor was to be. The august body in whose hands the appointment lay was absolutely unconscious of the existence of Mr. St. John. Several members of it, it is true, were his own contemporaries, and had been his acquaintances in the old days when these very dons themselves traversed their quadrangles with such hopes and fears

in respect to the issue of an examination, as the destruction of the world or its salvation would scarcely rouse in them now; but what was it likely they could know about a man who at sixty-five was only a curate, who had never asked for anything, never tried for anything; but had kept himself out of sight and knowledge for a lifetime? Those of them who had a dim recollection that "old St. John" was Chester's curate in charge, naturally thought that he held that precarious and unprofitable place for so long, because of some personal connection with the locality, or preference for it, which he was well off enough to be able to indulge. He had been poor in his youth, put probably his wife had had money, or something had fallen to him. What so likely as that something good should fall by inheritance to a man with such a patrician name? Therefore let

nobody blame the dons. They might have been capable (though I don't know whether they would have had any right to exercise their patronage so) of a great act of poetic justice, and might have given to the undistinguished but old member of their college the reward of his long exertions, had they known. But as they did not know, what could these good men do but allot it to the excellent young Fellow—already the winner of all kinds of honours—who condescended to be willing to accept the humble rectory? Everybody said it was not worth Mildmay's while to shelve himself in an obscure place like Brentburn; that it was a strange thing for him to do; that he would hate it as poor Chester—also an extremely accomplished man and fellow of his college—had done. Gossips—and such beings exist in the most classical places—feared that he must want the

money; though some thought he was merely disinclined to let a tolerable small living, not far from town, and in a good county, where there were many "nice families," pass him; but very few people, so far as I am aware, thought of any higher motive which a popular young don could have for such a fancy.

Mr. Mildmay was quite one of the advanced rank of young Oxford men. I have never been able to understand how it was that he continued more or less orthodox, but he had done so by special constitution of mind, I suppose, which in some tends to belief as much as in some others it tends to unbelief. He was not one of those uncomfortable people who are always following out "truth" to some bitter end or other, and refusing all compromise. Perhaps he was not so profound as are those troublesome spirits, but he was a great deal happier, and a

great deal more agreeable. It is quite possible that some young reader may object to this as a shameful begging of the question whether it is not best to follow "truth" with bosom bare into whatsoever wintry lands that oft-bewildered power may lead. I don't know; some minds have little inclination towards the sombre guesses of science, new or old; and perhaps some may prefer Roger Mildmay for the mere fact that he did not feel himself to have outgrown Christianity; which, I confess, is my own feeling on the subject. However, if it is any satisfaction to the said young reader, I may as well avow that though nature kept him from being sceptical, that kindly nurse did not hinder him from throwing himself into much semi-intellectual foolishness in other ways. To hear him talk of art was enough to make all the Academy dance with fury, and drive the ordinary

learner, however little attached to the Academy, into absolute imbecility; and his rooms were as good as a show, with all the last fantastical delights of the day —more like a museum of china and knick-knacks than rooms to live in. His floors were littered with rugs, over which, in the æsthetic dimness, unwary visitors tumbled; his walls were toned into olive greens or peacock blues, dark enough to have defied all the sunshine of the Indies to light them up. He had few pictures; but his rooms were hung with photographs "taken direct," and a collection of old china plates, which perhaps, in their primitive colours and broad effect, "came" better than pictures in the subdued and melancholy light. But why insist upon these details? A great many highly-cultured persons have the same kind of rooms, and Mildmay was something more than a highly-cultured person. All this

amused and occupied him very much—for indeed collecting is a very amusing occupation; and when he had found something "really good" in an old curiosity shop, it exhilarated him greatly to bring it home, and find a place for it among his precious stores, and to make it "compose" with the other curiosities around it. As sheer play, I don't know any play more pleasant; and when he looked round upon the dim world of *objets d'art* that covered all his walls, shelves, and tables, and marked the fine pictorial effect of the one brilliant spot of light which the green shade of his reading-lamp prevented from too great diffusion—when, I say, looking up from his studies, Mr. Mildmay looked round upon all this, and felt that only very fine taste, and much patient labour, supported by a tolerably well-filled purse, could have brought it all together, and arranged everything into

one harmonious whole, there came a glow of gentle satisfaction to the heart of the young don.

But then he sighed. All perfection is melancholy. When you have finally arranged your last acquisition, and look round upon a completeness which, even for the introduction of additional beauty, it seems wicked to disturb, what can you do but sigh? And there was more than this in the breath of melancholy—the long-drawn utterance of an unsatisfied soul in Mildmay's sigh. After all, a man cannot live for china, for æsthetic arrangement, for furniture, however exquisite; or even for art, when he is merely a critic, commentator, and amateur—not a worker in the same. You may suppose that he was weary of his loneliness; that he wanted a companion, or those domestic joys which are supposed to be so infinitely prized in England. I

am sorry to say this was not the case. The class to which Mildmay belongs are rather in the way of scouting domestic joys. A man who makes a goddess of his room, who adores china, and decks his mantleshelf with lace, seldom (in theory) wants a wife, or sighs for a companion of his joys and sorrows. For why? He does not deal much in sorrows or in joys. The deepest delight which can thrill the soul in the discovery of old Worcester or royal Dresden, scarcely reaches to the height of passion; and even if a matchless cup of *Henri Deux* were to be shivered to pieces in your hand, your despair would not appeal to human sympathy as would the loss of a very much commoner piece of flesh and blood. And then young ladies as a class are not, I fear, great in the marks of china, and even in the feminine speciality of lace require years to mellow them into

admiration of those archæological morsels which cannot be worn. Besides, the very aspect of such rooms as those I have indicated (not being bold enough to attempt to describe them) is inimical to all conjoint and common existence. Solitude is taken for granted in all those dainty arrangements; in the dim air, the dusky walls, the subdued tone. A child in the place, ye heavens! imagination shivers, and dares not contemplate what might follow.

And then Mr. Mildmay had exhausted this delight. I believe his rooms were papered with three different kinds of the choicest paper that ever came out of Mr. Morris's hands. His curtains had been embroidered in the art school of needlework on cloth woven and dyed expressly for him. An ancient piece of lovely Italian tapestry hung over one door, and another was veiled by a glorious bit of

eastern work from Damascus or Constantinople. His Italian cabinets were enough to make you faint with envy; his Venice glass—but why should I go on? The rugs which tripped you up as you threaded your way through the delicate artificial twilight were as valuable as had they been woven in gold; and no sooner was it known that Mildmay had accepted a living than all the superior classes in the southern half of England pricked up their ears. Would there be a sale? About a thousand connoisseurs from all parts of the country balanced themselves metaphorically on one foot like Raphael's St. Michael, ready to swoop down at the first note of warning. I am not sure that among railway authorities there were not preparations for a special train.

Mr. Mildmay had got tired of it all. Suddenly in that dainty dimness of high culture it had occurred to him that

studies of old art and accumulations of the loveliest furniture were not life. What was life? There are so many that ask that question, and the replies are so feeble. The commonest rendering is that which Faust in sheer disgust of intellectualism plunged into—pleasure; with what results the reader knows. Pleasure in its coarser meaning, in the Faust sense, and in the vulgar sensual sense, was only a disgust to such a man as Roger Mildmay. What could he have done with his fine tastes and pure habits in the *coulisses* or the casinos? He would only have recoiled with the sickening sensations of physical loathing as well as mental. What then? Should he marry and have a family, which is the virtuous and respectable answer to his question? He had no inclination that way. The woman whom he was to marry had not yet risen on his firmament, and he was not the

kind of man to determine on marriage in the abstract, dissociated from any individual. How then was he to know life, and have it? Should he go off into the distant world and travel, and discover new treasures of art in unsuspected places, and bring home his trophies from all quarters of the world? But he had done this so often already that even the idea almost fatigued him. Besides, all these expedients, pleasure, domesticity, travel, would all have been ways of pleasing himself only, and he had already done a great deal to please himself. Life must have something in it surely of sharper, more pungent flavour. It could not be a mere course of ordinary days one succeeding another, marked out by dinners, books, conversations, the same thing over again, never more than an hour of it at a time in a man's possession, nothing in it that could not be foreseen and mapped

out. This could not be life. How was he to get at life? He sat and wondered over this problem among his beautiful collections. He had nothing to do, you will say; and yet you can't imagine how busy he was. In short, he was never without something to do. He had edited a Greek play, he had written magazine articles, he had read papers before literary societies, he had delivered lectures. Few, very few, were his unoccupied moments. He knew a great many people in the highest classes of society, and kept up a lively intercourse with the most intelligent, the most cultivated minds of his time. He was, indeed, himself one of the most highly cultured persons of his standing; yet here he sat in the most delightful rooms in his college, sighing for life, life!

What is life? Digging, ploughing, one can understand that; but unfortunately

one cannot dig, and "to beg I am ashamed." These familiar words suggested themselves by the merest trick of the ear to his mind unawares. To beg, the Franciscans he had seen in old Italy had not been at all ashamed; neither were the people who now and then penetrated into college rooms with—if not the Franciscan's wallet, or the penitent's rattling money-box—lists of subscriptions with which to beguile the unwary. For what? For hospitals, schools, missions, churches; the grand deduction to be drawn from all this being that there were a great many people in the world, by their own fault or that of others, miserable, sick, ignorant, wicked; and that a great many more people, from good or indifferent motives, on true or on false pretences, were making a great fuss about helping them. This fuss was in a general way annoying, and even revolting to the *dilettanti*, whose

object is to see and hear only things that are beautiful, to encourage in themselves and others delightful sensations; but yet when you came to think of it, it could not be denied that the whole system of public charity had a meaning. In some cases a false, foolish, wrong meaning, no doubt; but yet——

If I were to tell you all the fancies that passed through Roger Mildmay's head on the subject, it would require volumes; and many of his thoughts were fantastic enough. The fact that he had taken orders and was the man he was, made it his proper business to teach others; but he would much rather, he thought, have reclaimed waste land, or something of that practical sort. Yes, to reclaim a bit of useless moorland and make it grow oats or even potatoes—that would be something; but then unfortunately the ludicrous side of the matter would come

over him. What could he do on his bit of moorland with those white hands of his? Would it not be much more sensible to pay honest wages to some poor honest man out of work, and let him do the digging? and then where was Roger Mildmay? still left, stranded, high and dry, upon the useless ground of his present existence. Such a man in such a self-discussion is as many women are. If he works, what is the good of it? It is to occupy, to please himself, not because the work is necessary to others; indeed, it is taking bread out of the mouths of others to do badly himself that which another man, probably lounging sadly, out of work, and seeing his children starve, would do well. Let him, then, go back to his own profession; and what was he to do? A clergyman must preach, and he did not feel at all at his ease in the pulpit. A clergyman must teach, and his

prevailing mood was a desire to learn. A clergyman must care for the poor, and he knew nothing about the poor. The result of all these confused and unsatisfactory reasonings with himself was that when the living of Brentburn was offered to him half in joke, he made a plunge at it, and accepted. "Let us try!" he said to himself. Anything was better than this perplexity. At the worst he could but fail.

Now, Mr. St. John, as I have said, was a member of the same college, and had served the parish of Brentburn for twenty years, and what was to Roger Mildmay an adventure, a very doubtful experiment, would have been to him life and living; and next on the list of eligible persons after Mr. Mildmay was the Rev. John Ruffhead, who was very anxious to marry and settle, and was a clergyman's son well trained to his work. Such injustices

are everywhere around us; they are nobody's fault, we say—they are the fault of the system; but what system would mend them it is hard to tell. And, on the other hand, perhaps neither Mr. St. John nor Mr. Ruffhead had the same high object before them as Roger had. The old man would have gone on in his gentle routine just as he had done all those years, always kind, soothing the poor folk more than he taught them; the young man would, though sure to do his duty, have thought perhaps more of the future Mrs. Ruffhead, and the settling down, than of any kind of heroic effort to realize life and serve the world. So that on the whole, ideally, my *dilettante* had the highest ideal; though the practical effect of him no one could venture to foretell.

He had decided to accept the living of Brentburn at once, feeling the offer to be a kind of answer of the oracle—for there

was a certain heathenism mingling with his Christianity—to his long-smouldering and unexpressed desires; but before concluding formally he went, by the advice of one of his friends, to look at the place, "to see how he would like it." "Like it! do I want to like it?" he said to himself. Must this always be the first question? Was it not rather the first possibility held out to him in the world—of duty, and a real, necessary, and certain work which should not be to please himself? He did not want to like it. Now, men of Mildmay's turn of mind are seldom deeply devoted to nature. They admire a fine landscape or fine sunset, no doubt, but it is chiefly for the composition, the effects of light and shade, the combination of colours. In the loveliest country they sigh for picture galleries and fine architecture, and cannot please themselves with the mists and the clouds, the

woods and the waters, the warm, sweet, boundless atmosphere itself, in which others find beauty and mystery unceasing. Yet on this occasion a different result took place; although it was contrary to his own principles, when he first came out of the prosaic little railway at Brentburn and saw at his right hand, one rich cloud of foliage rounding upon another, and all the wealth of princely trees standing up in their battalions under the full warm August sky; and on the other the sweet wild common bursting forth in a purple blaze of heather, all belted and broken with the monastic gloom of the pine-woods and ineffable blue distances of the wilder country—there suddenly fell upon him a love at first sight for this insignificant rural place, which I cannot account for any more than he could. I should be disposed to say that the scent of the fir-trees went to his head, as it does

to mine; but then the very soul within him melted to the great, broad, delicious greenness of shadows in the forest; and the two between them held him in an ecstasy, in that sweet lapse of all sense and thought into which nature sometimes surprises us, when all at once, without any suspicion on our part of what she is about, she throws herself open to us, and holds out her tender arms. Mildmay stood in this partial trance, not knowing what he was doing, for—two full minutes, then he picked himself up, slightly ashamed of his ecstasy, and asked his way to the church, and said to himself (as I think Mr. Ruskin says somewhere) that mere nature without art to back her up is little, but that he might indeed permit himself to feel those indescribable sensations if he could look at all this as a background to a beautiful piece of ancient architecture in the shape of a church.

Alas, poor Mr. Mildmay! I don't know why it had never been broken to him. Ignorant persons had said "a very nice church," perhaps out of sheer ignorance, perhaps from the commercial point of view that a new church in perfect repair is much more delightful, to a young rector's pocket at least, than the most picturesque old one in perpetual need of restorations. But anyhow, when the church of Brentburn did burst upon him in all its newness, poor Roger put out his hand to the first support he could find, and felt disposed to swoon. The support which he found to lean on was the wooden rail, round a rather nasty duck-pond which lay between two cottages, skirting the garden hedge of one of them. Perhaps it was the odour of this very undelightful feature in the scene that made him feel like fainting, rather than the sight of the church; but he did not think so in the

horror of the moment. He who had hoped to see the distant landscape all enhanced and glorified, by looking at it from among the ancestral elms or solemn yew-trees about a venerable village spire, and old grey, mossy Saxon walls—or beside the lovely tracery of some decorated window with perhaps broken pieces of old glass glimmering out like emeralds and rubies! The church, I have already said, was painfully new; it was in the most perfect good order; the stones might have been scrubbed with scrubbing-brushes that very morning; and, worse than all, it was good Gothic, quite correct and unobjectionable. The poor young don's head drooped upon his breast, his foot slipped on the edge of the duck-pond. Never was a more delicate distress; and yet but for the despairing grasp he gave to the paling, the result might have been grotesque enough.

"Be you poorly, sir?" said old Mrs. Joel, who was standing, as she generally was, at her cottage door.

"No, no, I thank you," said the new rector faintly; "I suppose it is the sun."

"Come in a bit and rest, bless you," said Mrs. Joel; "you do look overcome. It is a bit strong is that water of hot days. Many a one comes to look at our cheuch. There's a power of old cheuches about, and ours is the only one I know of as is new, sir, and sweet and clean—though I says it as shouldn't," said the old woman, smoothing her apron and curtsying with a conscious smile.

"You are the sexton's wife? you have the charge of it?" said Mr. Mildmay.

"Thank my stars! I ain't no man's wife," said Mrs. Joel. "I be old John Joel's widow—and a queer one he was; and the curate he say as I was to keep the place, though there's a deal of

jealousy about. I never see in all my born days a jealouser place than Brentburn."

"Who is the curate?" asked Mr. Mildmay.

"Bless your soul, sir, he'll be as pleased as Punch to see you. You go up bold to the big door and ask for Mr. St. John; he would always have the hartis-gentlemen and that sort in, to take a cup of tea with him. The Missis didn't hold with it in her time. She had a deal of pride, though you wouldn't have thought it at first. But since she's dead and gone, Mr. St. John he do have his way; and two pretty young ladies just come from school," said Mrs. Joel with a smirk. She was herself very curious about the stranger, who was evidently not a "hartis-gentleman." "Maybe you was looking for lodgings, like?" she said, after a pause.

"No, no," said Mildmay, with unnecessary explanatoriness; "I was only struck by the church, in passing, and wished to know who was the clergyman——"

"Between ourselves, sir," said Mrs. Joel, approaching closer than was pleasant, for her dinner had been highly seasoned, "I don't know as Mr. St. John is what you call the clergyman. He ain't but the curate, and I do hear as there is a real right clergyman a-coming. But you won't name it, not as coming from me? for I can't say but he's always been a good friend."

"Oh no, I shall not name it. Good morning," cried Mildmay hurriedly. A new church, a horrible duck-pond, an old woman who smelt of onions. He hurried along, scarcely aware in his haste until he arrived in front of it that the house beyond the church was the rectory, his future home.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ENEMY.

THE girls I need not say had been engaged in calculations long and weary during these intervening days. Cicely, who had at once taken possession of all the details of housekeeping, had by this time made a discovery of the most overwhelming character; which was that the curate was in arrears with all the tradespeople in the parish, and that the "books," instead of having the trim appearance she remembered, were full of long lists of things supplied, broken by no safe measure of weeks, but running

on from month to month and from year to year, with here and there a melancholy payment "to account" set down against it. Cicely was young and she had no money, and knew by her own experience how hard it was to make it; and she was overwhelmed by this discovery. She took the books in her lap and crept into the drawing-room beside Mab, who was making a study of the children in the dreary stillness of the afternoon. The two little boys were posed against the big sofa, on the carpet. The young artist had pulled off their shoes and stockings, and, indeed, left very little clothes at all upon Charley, who let her do as she pleased with him without remonstrance, sucking his thumb and gazing at her with his pale blue eyes. Harry had protested, but had to submit to the taking away of his shoes, and now sat gloomily regarding his toes, and

trying to keep awake with supernatural lurches and recoveries; Charley, more placid, had dropped off. He had still his thumb in his mouth, his round cheek lying flushed against the cushion, his round white limbs huddled up in a motionless stillness of sleep. Harry sat upright, as upright as possible, and nodded. Mab had got them both outlined on her paper, and was working with great energy and absorption when Cicely came in with the books in her lap. "Oh, go away, go away," cried Mab, "whoever you are! Don't disturb them! If you wake them all is lost!"

Cicely stood at the door watching the group. Mab had improvised an easel, she had put on a linen blouse over her black and white muslin dress. She had closed the shutters of two windows, leaving the light from the middle one to fall upon the children. In the cool shade,

moving now and then a step backwards to see the effect of her drawing, her light figure, full of purpose and energy, her pretty white hand a little stained with the charcoal with which she was working, she was a picture in herself. Cicely, her eyes very red and heavy—for indeed she had been crying—and the bundle of grocery books in her apron, paused and looked at her sister with a gush of admiration, a sharp pinch of something like envy. Mab could do this which looked like witchcraft, while she could only count, and count, and cry over these hopeless books. What good would crying do? If she cried her eyes out it would not pay a sixpence. Cicely knew that she had more "sense" than Mab. It was natural. She was nineteen, Mab only eighteen, and a year is so much at that age! But Mab was clever. She could do something which

Cicely could not even understand; and she would be able to make money, which Cicely could scarcely hope to do. It was envy, but of a generous kind. Cicely went across the room quite humbly behind backs, not to disturb her sister's work, and sat down by the darkened window, through which a fresh little breeze from the garden was coming in. It distracted her for a moment from her more serious cares to watch the work going on. She thought how pretty Mab looked, lighting up the poetical darkness, working away so vigorously and pleasantly with only that pucker of anxiety in her white forehead, lest her sitters should move. "Oh, quiet, quiet!" she said, almost breathless. "He must not either go to sleep or wake right up, till I have put them in. Roll the ball to him softly, Cicely, quite softly as if he were a kitten." Cicely put away the

terrible books and knelt down on the carpet and rolled the big ball, which Mab had been moving with her foot towards little dozing Harry, who watched it with eyes glazing over with sleep. The light and the warmth and the stillness were too much for him. Just as the ball arrived at his soft little pink toes he tumbled over all in a heap, with his head upon Charley. Mab gave a cry of vexation. "But never mind, it was not your fault," she said, to make up for her impatience. And indeed Cicely felt it was rather hard to be blamed.

"After all it does not matter," said Mab. "I have done enough—but I shall never never get them to look like that again. How pretty children are even when they are ugly! What pictures such things make! how anybody can help making pictures all the day long I can't imagine. It is only that you will not try."

"I would try if I had any hope," said Cicely; "I would do anything. Oh, I wonder if there is anything I could do!"

"Why, of course you can teach," said Mab, consoling her, "a great deal better than I can. I get impatient; but you shan't teach; I am the brother and you are the sister, and you are to keep my house."

"That was all very well," said Cicely, "so long as there was only us two; but now look," she cried pointing to the two children lying over one another in the light, asleep, "there is *them* — and papa——"

"They are delightful like that," cried Mab starting up; "oh, quick, give me that portfolio with the paper! I must try them again. Just look at all those legs and arms!—and yet they are not a bit pretty in real life," cried Mab in the

fervour of her art, making a fine natural distinction.

Cicely handed her all she wanted, and looked on with wondering admiration for a moment; but then she shook her head slightly and sighed. "You live in another world," she said, "you artists. Oh, Mab, I don't want to disturb you, but if you knew how unhappy I am—— "

"What is the matter? and why should you be more anxious than papa is? " cried Mab busy with her charcoal. "Don't make yourself unhappy, dear. Things always come right somehow. I think so as well as papa."

"You don't mind either of you so long as you have—— Oh, you don't know how bad things are. Mab! we are in debt."

Mab stopped her work, appalled, and looked her sister in the face. This was a terrible word to the two girls, who never

had known what it was to have any money. "In debt!" she said.

"Yes, in debt—do you wonder now that I am wretched? I don't know even if papa knows; and now he has lost even the little income he had, and we have given up our situations. Oh, Mab! Mab! think a little; what are we to do?"

Mab let her chalk fall out of her hand. She went and knelt down by Cicely's side, and put one soft cheek against another as if that would do any good. "Oh, how can I tell?" she said with tears in her eyes. "I never was any good to think. Is it much—is it very bad? is there anything we can do?"

Cicely shed a few tears over the butcher's book which was uppermost. "If we were staying here for ever," she said, "as we were all foolish enough to think when we came—we might have paid it with a struggle. I should have sent

away those two maids, and tried to do everything myself."

"Everything, Cicely?" Mab was as much appalled at the thought of life without a Betsy, as a fine lady would be denuded of her establishment. The want of a maid-of-all-work represents a dreadful coming down in life, almost more than a greater apparent loss does. Her countenance fell, the corners of her mouth took a downward curve, and her pride received a crushing blow. Yet if you consider what Betsy was, the loss was not deadly. But as usual it was not the actual but the sentimental view of the case which struck the girls.

"Yes," said Cicely, with a solemn paleness on her face. She felt the humiliation too. "I shouldn't mind *doing* things," she said, her voice breaking a little; "it is what people will think. Us, a clergyman's daughters! But what is the use

even of that?" she cried; "it will do no good now. Papa must leave Brentburn, and we have not a shilling, not a penny now, to pay those things with. I think and think—but I cannot tell what we are to do."

The two clung together in an agony of silence for a moment; how many wringings of the heart have been caused by a little money! and so often those who suffer are not those who are to blame. The ruin that seemed to be involved was unspeakable to the two girls; they did not know what the butcher and the baker might be able to do to them; nor did they know of any way of escape.

"If there was any hope," said Cicely after a pause, "of staying here—I would go round to them all, and ask them to take pity upon us; to let us begin again paying every week, and wait till we could scrape some money together for what is

past. That, I think, would be quite possible, if we were to stay; and we might take pupils——"

"To be sure," cried Mab, relieved, springing up with the easy hope of a sanguine disposition, "and I might get something to do. In the meantime I can finish my drawing. They have not stirred a bit, look, Cicely. They are like two little white statues. It may be a pity that they were ever born, as Aunt Jane says—but they are delightful models. I almost think," Mab went on piously, working with bold and rapid fingers, "that in all this that has happened there must have been a special providence for me."

Cicely looked up with surprise at this speech, but she made no reply. She was too full of thought to see the humour of the suggestion. Mab's art furnished a delightful way of escape for her out of all

perplexity; but Cicely could only go back to the butcher's book. "What could we do, I wonder," she said half to herself, for she did not expect any advice from her sister, "about the living? Very likely they don't know anything about poor papa. It may be very highminded never to ask for anything," said poor Cicely, "but then how can we expect that other people will come and thrust bread into our mouths? It is better to ask than to starve. As a matter of fact we cannot starve quietly, because if we are found dead of hunger, there is sure to be a business in the papers, and everything exposed. 'Death, from starvation, of a clergyman's family!' That would make a great deal more fuss than quietly going and asking for something for papa. I am not a bold girl—at least I don't think so," she cried, her soft face growing crimson at the thought, "but I would not mind

going to any one, if it was the Head of the College, or the Lord Chancellor, or even the Queen!"

"I wonder," said Mab, "if we met the Queen driving in the forest—as one does sometimes—whether we might not ask her, as people used to do long ago? I don't think she would mind. Why should she mind? She could not be frightened, or even angry, with two girls."

Cicely shook her head. "The Queen has nothing to do with Brentburn; and why should she be troubled with us any more than any other lady? No! that sort of thing has to be done in a business way," said the elder sister seriously. "If I could find out who was the chief man, the Head of the College——"

They had been so much absorbed that they had not heard any sound outside; and at this moment the door was suddenly thrown open, admitting a flood of cross

light, and revealing suddenly the figures of the curate and some one who followed him.

"My dears!" began Mr. St. John, surprised.

"Oh, papa! you have woke them up. You have spoiled my light!" cried Mab, in despair.

Cicely started to her feet, letting the account books tumble on the floor; and the two little boys raised a simultaneous howl of sleepy woe. "Harry wants his tea," they both piped piteously. Mr. Mildmay, whom the curate had met at the gate, looked with a surprise I cannot describe on this extraordinary scene. The white babies in the light had seemed to him at first an exquisite little "composition," which went to his very heart; and the two other figures, half lit up by the stream of unwelcome light from the door, bewildered the young man. Who were

they, or what? One indignant, holding her charcoal with artistic energy; the other, startled, gazing at himself with a hostile sentiment, which he could not understand, in her eyes.

"My love," said the gentle curate, "you should not make a studio of the drawing-room." Mr. St. John was not disturbed by the wailing of the little boys, to which, I suppose, he was used. "Cicely, this is Mr. Mildmay, from Oxford, who has come—to look at the parish," he added, with a gentle sigh. "Let us have tea."

Why did the girl look at him with that paleness of anger in her face? Mr. Mildmay's attention was distracted from the drawing and the artist, who, naturally, would have interested him most, by the gleam of hostility, the resentment and defiance in Cicely's eyes.

"Yes, papa," she said shortly; and

with merely an inclination of her head to acknowledge his introduction to her, she took up the children, Charley in one arm, who was half dressed; Harry under the other, whose feet were bare, and carried them out of the room. She had divined the first moment she saw him, a dark figure against the light, who he was; and I cannot describe the bitterness that swelled like a flood through poor Cicely's heart. It was all over, then! There was no further hope, however fantastical, from College or Chancellor, or Queen! Fantastic, indeed, the hope had been; but Cicely was young, and had been more buoyed up by this delusion, even in her despair, than she was aware of. She felt herself fall down, down into unspeakable depths, and the very heart within her seemed to feel the physical pain of it, lying crushed and sore, throbbing all over with sudden

suffering. The passionate force of the shock gave her strength, or I do not think she could have carried the two children away as she did, one in each arm, while the stranger looked on amazed. Little Charley, always peaceable, held her fast round the neck, with his head against her cheek; but Harry, whom she carried under her other arm, lifted his head a little from that horizontal position, and kept up his melancholy whine. She was not fond of the children; how could she be? and I think would gladly have "given them a shake" in the excitement and misery of her feelings. It was so hard upon the girl, that I think she might be forgiven for feeling that thus her young arms were to be hampered all her life; and, meanwhile, she felt that her father and sister would be perfectly amiable to the stranger, who was about to supplant them, and turn them out of

their house. This, I am afraid, exasperated Cicely as much as anything else. "These two" would have no *arrière pensée;* they would be perfectly kind to him, as though he were acting the part of their best friend.

And, indeed, this was how it turned out. When she went back, having disposed of the children, to make the tea, Cicely found Mab and Mr. Mildmay in great amity over the uncompleted drawing. He had been criticising, but he had been praising as well; and Mab was flushed with pleasure and interest. She ran off laughing, to take off her blouse and wash her hands, when Cicely came in, and the elder sister, who felt that her eyes were still red, felt at the same time that her ungenial and constrained reception of him had struck the new-comer. She went and gathered up the account-books from the floor with a sigh. Despair

was in her heart. How could she talk and smile as the others had been doing? As for Mr. St. John, he was as pleased with his visitor as if he had brought him something, instead of taking all hope from him. It was rarely the good man saw any but heavy parish people—the rural souls with whom indeed he was friendly, but who had nothing to say to him except about their crops and local gossip. The gossip of Oxford was much sweeter to his ears. He liked to tell of the aspect of things "in my time," as I suppose we all do; and how different this and that was now-a-days. "I knew him when he was a curate like myself," he said, with a soft sigh, talking of the dean, that lofty dignitary. "We were at school together, and I used to be the better man;" and this was spoken of the vice-chancellor himself; and he enjoyed and wondered to hear of all their

grandeurs. He had met Mildmay on the road, looking through the gate at the rectory, and had addressed him in his suave old-world way as a stranger. Then they had talked of the church, that most natural of subjects between two clergymen; and then, half reluctantly, half with a sense of compulsion, the stranger had told him who he was. Mr. St. John, though he was poor, had all the hospitable instincts of a prince. He insisted that his new acquaintance should come in and see the house, and hear about everything. He would have given the same invitation, he said afterwards, to any probable new resident in the parish, and why not to the new rector? for in Mr. St. John's mind there was no gall.

But to describe Mildmay's feelings when he was suddenly introduced into this novel world is more difficult. He

was taken entirely by surprise. He did not know anything about the curate in charge. If he thought of his predecessor at all it was the late rector he thought of, who had died on the shores of the Bay of Naples after a life-long banishment from England. He could understand all that; to go away altogether after art, antiquity, Pompeii, classic editings, and æsthetic delights was perfectly comprehensible to the young Oxford man. But this—what was this? The old man before him, so gentle, so suave, so smiling, his own inferior in position, for was he not rector elect, while Mr. St. John was but curate? Yet so far above him in years and experience, and all that constitutes superiority among gentlemen of equal breeding. Why was he here as curate? and why did *that* girl look at himself with so much suppressed assion in her eyes? and where had the

other been trained to draw so well? and what was the meaning of the two children, so unlike all the others, whom his young enemy had carried off impetuously, instead of ringing the bell for their nurse as any one else would have done? Mildmay felt a thrilling sensation of newness as he sat down at the tea-table, and looked on, an interested spectator at all that was proceeding under his eyes. This in its way was evidently *life;* there was no mistaking the passion that existed underneath this quiet surface, the something more than met the eye. Was it a skeleton in the closet, as the domestic cynic says? But these were not words that seemed to apply to this calm old man and these young girls. It was life, not the quiet of books, and learned talk, and superficial discussion, but a quiet full of possibilities, full of hidden struggle and feeling. Mildmay felt as if he had

come out of his den in the dark like an owl, and half blinking in the unusual light, was placed as spectator of some strange drama, some episode full of interest, to the character of which he had as yet no clue.

"You are looking at the furniture; it is not mine," said Mr. St. John, "except the carpets, which, as you say, are much worn. The other things are all Mr. Chester's. I am expecting every day to hear what is to be done with them. Most likely they will sell it; if you wanted anything——"

Mildmay made a gesture of horror in spite of himself, and Mab laughed.

"You do not think Mr. Mildmay wants all that mahogany, papa? The catafalque there, Cicely and I agreed it was more like a tomb in Westminster Abbey than anything else."

"What is amiss with it?" said Mr.

St. John. "I always understood it was very good. I am told they don't make things nearly so strong or so substantial now. Poor Chester! He was a man of very fine taste, Mr. Mildmay. But why do you laugh, my dear? That was why he was so fond of Italy; shattered health, you know. Those men who are so fond of art are generally excitable; a little thing has an effect upon them. Cicely, give Mr. Mildmay some tea."

"Yes, papa," said Cicely; and gave the stranger a look which made him think his tea might be poisoned. Mr. St. John went maundering kindly—

"You said you were going to London, and had left your things at the station? Why shouldn't you stay all night here instead? There are a great many things that I would like to show you—the church and the school for instance, and I should like to take you to see some of

my poor people. Cicely, we can give Mr. Mildmay a bed?"

Cicely looked up at her father quickly. There was a half-entreaty, a pathetic wonder, mingled with anger, in her eyes. "How can you?" she seemed to say. Then she answered hesitating, "There are plenty of beds, but I don't know if they are aired — if they are comfortable." Strangely enough, the more reluctant she was to have him, the more inclined Mildmay felt to stay.

"It is very kind," he said. "I cannot think how it is possible that I can have had the assurance to thrust myself upon you like this. I am afraid Miss St. John thinks it would be very troublesome."

"Troublesome! There is no trouble at all. Cicely is not so foolish and inhospitable," said the curate in full current of his open-heartedness. "My dear, it is

fine warm weather, and Mr. Mildmay is a young man. He is not afraid of rheumatics like the old people in the parish. He and I will walk up to the station after tea and fetch his bag, and I will show him several things on the way. You will tell Betsy?"

"I will see that everything is ready," she said, with so much more meaning in the words than was natural or necessary. Her eyes were a little dilated with crying, and slightly red at the edges; there was surprise and remonstrance in them, and she did not condescend by a single word to second her father's invitation. This settled the question. Had she asked him, Mildmay might have been indifferent; but as she did not ask him, he made up his mind it was quite necessary he should stay.

"I shall perhaps see you finish that group," he said to Mab, who was in-

terested and amused by the novelty of his appearance, as her father was.

"Ah, but I shall never get them into the same *pose!* If papa had not come in so suddenly, waking them—besides spoiling my light——"

"I am afraid it was partly my fault," he said; "but I did not expect to be brought into the presence of an artist."

The colour rose on Mab's cheeks. "Please don't flatter me," she said. "I want so much to be an artist. Shall I ever be able to do anything, do you think? for you seem to know."

Cicely looked at her sister, her eyes sparkling with offence and reproach. "The people who know you best think so," she said. "It is not right to ask a stranger. How can Mr. Mildmay know?"

How hostile she was! between her smiling pretty sister, who was ready to

talk as much as he pleased, and her kind old suave father, what a rugged implacable young woman! What could he have done to her? Mildmay felt as much aggrieved when she called him a stranger, as if it had been a downright injury. "I know a little about art," he said quite humbly; "enough to perceive that your sister has a great deal of real talent, Miss St. John."

"Yes, yes, she is clever," said the curate. "I hope it will be of some use to you, my poor Mab. Now, Mr. Mildmay, let us go. I want to show you the rectory fields, and the real village, which is some way off. You must not think this cluster of houses is Brentburn. It is pleasant walking in the cool of the afternoon, and, my dears, a walk will be good for you too. Come down by the common and meet us. Cicely," he added in a half-whisper, standing aside to let his

guest pass, "my dear, you are not so polite as I hoped. I wish you would look more kind and more pleased."

"But I am not pleased. Oh, papa, why did you ask him? I cannot bear the sight of him," she cried.

"My love!" said the astonished curate. He was so much surprised by this outburst that he did not know how to reply. Then he put his hand softly upon her forehead, and looked into her eyes. "I see what it is. You are a little feverish: you are not well. It is the hot weather, no doubt," he said.

"Oh, papa! I am well enough; but I am very wretched. Let me speak to you when we have got rid of this man—before you go to bed."

"Surely, my dear," he said soothingly, and kissed her forehead. "I should advise you to lie down for a little, and keep quiet, and the fever may pass off.

But I must not keep my guest waiting," and with this Mr. St. John went away, talking cheerfully in the hall to his companion as he rejoined him. "It is trying weather," they heard him saying. "I stopped behind for a moment to speak to my eldest daughter. I do not think she is well."

"Will papa discuss your health with this new man?" cried Mab. "How funny he is! But don't be so savage, Ciss. If it must be, let us make the best of it. Mr. Mildmay is very nice to talk to. Let us take whatever amusement is thrown in our way."

"Oh, amusement!" said Cicely. "You are like papa; you don't think what is involved. This is an end of everything. What are we to do? Where are we to go to? His name is not Mildmay; it is Ruin and Destruction. It is all I can do not to burst out upon him and ask him,

oh! how has he the heart—how has he the heart to come here!"

"If you did I think he would not come," said Mab calmly. "What a pity people cannot say exactly what they think. But if he gave it up, there would be some one else. We must make up our minds to it. And how beautifully poor papa behaves through it all."

"I wish he were not so beautiful!" cried Cicely in her despair, almost grinding her white teeth. "I think you will drive me mad between you—papa and you."

CHAPTER X.

IN THE PARISH.

Mr. Mildmay had a very pleasant walk. He went through Brentburn proper, which was a mile from the church on the rich woodland side of the parish, an ordinary little village, a mixture of old picturesque Berkshire cottages, with high sloping roofs and aged harmonious mossy brick walls, and very new square houses in the bilious brick of modern use—mean and clean and angular. The cottages, with their wild old gardens and mossed apple-trees delighted him; but the curate shook his head, "They will be the curse

of your life," he said solemnly, at which the young Oxford man was disposed to laugh.

A few people were standing about their doors enjoying the cool evening, at whom the new rector looked with curiosity. They were very commonplace people, with the set hard faces so common among the rural poor, half caused by exposure to the open air, and half by the dull routine in which their life is spent. Mildmay looked at them wistfully. Were they the kind of people among whom he could find the life he sought? A few of the women were gossiping, the men stared blankly at him as he passed, saluting the curate gruffly; and evidently the wag among them made some rough joke, received with loud laughter, upon the two black-coats.

"Yes," said the curate mildly, "that fellow Joe Endley is one of the worst in

the parish. It was at us, no doubt, they were laughing. Anything above their own level, except money, they don't understand; and they know I have no money. Good evening, Mr. Wilkins. What a sweet evening it is!"

"Good evening, sir," said the grocer, coming, with his apron round him from his shop-door. "I thought perhaps as you was comin' to me, sir, along o' the letter I sent you."

"I did not get any letter," said Mr. St. John, looking at the grocer in a helpless, pitiful way, which his companion remarked wonderingly. The curate seemed to shrink somehow: a painful look came upon his face.

"I sent up this afternoon with my cart," said Wilkins, "to say as, if it was quite convenient——"

"My daughter will see to it—my daughter will see to it," said the curate

anxiously. "I am occupied at present, as you perceive, and in a hurry. She will see you, or I, to-morrow."

And he shuffled on through the dust of the highroad, quickening his pace. His step had been the long, firm, manly step of a man still young, till they met with this interruption. But poor Mr. St. John fell into a shuffle when he met the grocer. His cheek got a hectic flush; he shrank visibly; his knees and his elbows grew prominent. He did not speak again till they had got beyond the village. Then he drew breath, and his natural outline came slowly back. "You will find much hardness among the people," he said; "Heaven forbid that I should blame them, poor souls: they live hardly, and have hardness to bear from others; but when any question arises between them and one who has unfortunately the nicetiés—the feelings—that we are brought

up to——" (the curate stopped); "and I never was used to it," he said, as if to himself, in a low voice.

What did it all mean? the new rector said to himself. I think it was easy enough to divine, for my part; but then the rector was young, and had always been well off, and it did not occur to him that a grocer, simply as grocer, could have any power over a clergyman; more and more he felt convinced that some drama, some domestic tragedy, must be connected with the St. Johns, and he felt more and more eager to find it out. They went to the station, and sent a boy to the rectory with Mildmay's portmanteau, and then they strayed home by the common, across which the setting sun threw its very last slanting arrow of gold.

"This is delightful!" said Mildmay. "What freedom! what breadth of at-

mosphere! One feels oneself on the moors, in the great, ample world, not shut in by walls and houses."

"No, there is little of these," said the curate; "and it is very healthy, I have always understood: the common is what my girls love. But I don't see them coming." He arched his hand over his eyes as a defence against the light, as he looked along the road for his daughters. Mr. St. John had quite recovered himself. I don't think that even the name of Wilkins would have discouraged him now. In the warm and balmy air he took off his hat, holding up his venerable bare head to the sky. It was a head which might have served for that of an old saint. His white hair was still thick and abundant, his eyes full of soft light, his expression tranquil as the evening. "I have come here in many troubles," he said, "and I have always been refreshed. I don't

pretend to know much about art, Mr. Mildmay, but nature is always soothing. Greenness cools the eyes whether it is study or tears that have fevered them. But I wonder what has become of the girls."

Mildmay was charmed by the meditative turn his companion's remarks had taken, but the question about the girls embarrassed him.

"I am afraid," he said, "that my intrusion has perhaps given Miss St. John some trouble."

"No; there is the servant, you know, a very good sort of girl, and Cicely is like her dear mother—never taken by surprise. If you are here as long as I have been you will know how pleasant it is to see a new face. We country folks rust: we fall into a fixed routine. I myself, see, was about to take this little byway unconsciously, a path I often

take, forgetting there was any one with me——

The curate looked wistfully along the thread of path; it had been worn by his own feet, and he seldom concluded his evening walk otherwise. Mildmay followed the narrow line with his eyes.

"It leads to the churchyard," he said. "I like a country churchyard. May we go there before we go in? What a pity the church is so new! and this part of Berkshire is rich in old churches, I understand?"

"It is in good repair, and much more wholesome than the old ones," said Mr. St. John. "They may be more picturesque. Here you can see into the rectory garden, the ground slopes so much; the church is very much higher than the common. It used to be sweet to me, looking back at the lights in the girls' rooms, when I stood——there they

are on the lawn now, Mr. Mildmay. They have not gone out, after all."

Mildmay, looking down from the churchyard path, felt that it was dishonourable to spy upon the two girls unaware of his scrutiny, whom he could just see within the wall of the rectory garden; but he could not help feeling that this was more and more like a drama which was being played before him. He followed Mr. St. John along the narrow path to the little white stile which admitted to the churchyard. The curate ceased his tranquil talk as they entered that inclosure. He turned mechanically as it seemed, to the left hand, and went round to a white cross upon a grave turned towards the common. It was of common stone, grey with years. The curate took off his hat again, and stood by it quite simply and calmly.

"It used to be sweet to me, standing

here, to see the lights in the girls' rooms," he said once more. The soft tranquillity of his tone suited the still twilight, the pensive silent plain. It was too still for sorrow, nor was there any touch of unhappiness in the gentle voice. Young Mildmay uncovered too, and stood wondering, reverent, with a swell of sympathy in his heart. Some men would have felt with anguish the unspeakable separation between the mother under the dews and the twinkle of the lights in her children's windows; but Mr. St. John was not of that mind. Yet, somehow, to have this stranger here made his loss seem fresher to him. "Cicely is very like her mother," he said, and touched the cross softly with his hand as if caressing it, and turned away. Mr. Mildmay could see that there were two paths up the mound to the white gate, and the meaning of them struck him

vividly—one was that by which they had just come from the common, the other led down straight to the rectory. His heart was more touched than I can say, by the gentle fidelity, consoled and calm, yet always tender, which had worn that double line through the grass.

Mr. St. John, however, made a hesitating pause at a corner before he took this second way home. "My other poor wife, poor Mrs. St. John, lies there; but that I can show you to-morrow," he said, in his gentle unchanged voice, and quietly went on to the gate, leading the way. "Supper will be ready," the curate continued, when they emerged again upon the turf. "We live a very simple primitive life here; our meals are not arranged quite as yours are, but it comes to the same thing. In short, whatever seeming differences there are, all ways of living come to much the same thing."

Did they so? Mr. St. John's meaning was of the simplest. He meant that whether you called your latest meal dinner or supper did not matter much; but his companion gave it a broader sense. With a jar of laughter in his mind that broke up the reverential respect of the previous moment, he followed his simple host into the house, which by-and-by was to be his own house. Poor Mrs. St. John, who was not the mother of the girls; whose grave could be shown to-morrow; for whose sake these paths had not been worn across the grass; the stranger gave her her little meed of human notice in that smothered laugh. Poor Miss Brown!

The supper was homely enough—cold meat and salad, and bread and cheese and jam—and would have been cheerful and pleasant, Mr. Mildmay thought, but for the absorbed looks of that elder daughter,

who was still somewhat unfriendly to him. He went upstairs to his room, where a large mahogany four-post bed, with heavy moreen hangings, awaited him, before the night was very far advanced. When he had been there for a short time, he saw that his door was not shut, and went to close it. As he did so, he caught a glimpse of Cicely going downstairs. She had retired some time before he did, so that her reappearance struck him all the more; and she was quite unconscious that he saw her. She carried a candle in one hand, and a pile of tradesmen's books in the other. She was pale, her look fixed, her nostrils a little dilated, like some one going to a painful task, he thought. As she moved down the dark staircase, a speck of light, with her candle shining on the whiteness of her face and dress, the walls, by which she flitted, looked more and more like

the scenery of a drama to the young man. If they only would have opened, as in the *real* theatre, and shown him where she was going, what she was about to do! But this was very mean curiosity on Mr. Mildmay's part. He shut his door humbly, that she might not be disturbed by the sound, and after a while went meekly to bed, trying to say to himself that he had no right to pry into the business of these good people, who had been so kind to him; though, indeed, she had not been kind to him, he reflected, by way of lessening his own sense of guilt. He heard subdued voices below for some time after, and wished more than ever that the scenery would open, and reveal this scene to him; but the substantial walls stood fast, and the moreen curtains hung grimly about him, shutting out everything. There was no compromise about the furniture at

the rectory; the pillared bedposts stood square, and stern, and strong, till poor Mildmay, dozing within them in the warm August night, thought them Samson's pillars in the house of Dagon, or the pillars of the earth.

Cicely went down to her father very resolute with her books. She had intended to say very little to him, but he had exasperated her, and she felt that she could not let him off. But her courage sank a little when she got into the study, and saw his white head in the light of the solitary candle. There were two candles on the table, but faithful to an old frugal habit, Mr. St. John had put out one of them when his guest left him. The room was good-sized, and full of huge mahogany book-cases; and as the table was at one end of it, there is no telling how full of gloom it was. One of the windows was open, and

a great solid piece of darkness seemed to have taken its place, and to be pouring in. Mr. St. John was looking over some old sermons, bending his head over the papers, with spectacles upon his nose, which he took off when Cicely came in. He did not usually sit up so long, and he was rather aggrieved at the late interview she had asked for. He did not like to be disturbed out of his usual way, and he felt that she was going to speak to him about Wilkins, the most painful subject which could be suggested. Cicely, too, when he raised his head, and took off his spectacles, found the interview a great deal more difficult than in her excited feelings she had supposed.

"Well, my dear," he said gently; "you wanted to speak to me." He gave a little shiver when he saw the books in her hand.

"Yes, papa," she said, laying them

down on the table; and then there was a pause. The soft night air came in, and crept wistfully about the room, moving the curtains. When it approaches midnight, even in August, there is always something chill and mournful in the night wind.

"I wanted to speak to you," said Cicely, catching her breath a little; "it was about the books. I don't know if you have looked at them lately. Oh, papa! do you know that we are—in debt? I don't know how to say it—a great deal in debt!"

"Not a great deal, my dear," he said faintly; "something, I know. Wilkins spoke to me to-day—almost before Mr. Mildmay."

"It is not Wilkins alone," said Cicely solemnly; "it is everybody. The butcher, too; and, oh! so many little people. How are they ever to be paid?

When I looked over the books to-day, not knowing—Oh! do you know how it has happened? Can they be cheating? It is my only hope."

"My dear," said the curate, faltering, "better that one should have done wrong than that a great many should have done wrong. Poor Mrs. St. John—nay, I should say both of us, Cicely; for I was also to blame. We were not like your mother, my dear; it all came natural to your mother; but she, or rather we——" Mr. St. John's voice sank into an indistinct confusion. He was too good to blame the poor woman who was dead, and he did not know how to meet the eyes thus shining upon him, youthful, inexorable, of Hester's child. But even Cicely was moved by her father's wistful looks, and the humility of his tone.

"If only one could see any way of

paying them," she said; "if even we had been staying here! I had a plan, and we might have done it. And it brings it all so near, and makes it so certain, to see this man."

"My love," said the curate remonstrating, "we knew that some one must come. It is not his fault. Why should we be unkind to him?"

"Unkind! Oh papa!" cried Cicely in her exasperation, "what had we to do with him? It was not our business to feast him and pet him. But that is nothing," she said, trembling with excitement; "I will not blame you, papa, for that or anything, if only you will say now what you are going to do, or where you think we can go, or what I must say to these poor people. We cannot stay here and starve, or till they put us in prison—only tell me what we must do."

"How can I tell you, Cicely," said the curate, "when I do not know myself? I must advertise or something," he said helplessly. "I am old, my dear. Few people want a curate of my age; I suppose it almost looks like a stigma on a man to be a curate at my age."

"Papa!" Cicely stopped short in what she was going to say, and looked at him with strained and anxious eyes. She had meant to assail him for still being a curate, but his self-condemnation closed the girl's lips, or rather roused her in defence.

"Yes," said Mr. St. John, "you may say I ought to have thought of that sooner; but when things go on for a long time one asks one's self why should not they go on for ever? 'He said, There will be peace in my time.' That was selfish of Hezekiah, my dear, very selfish, when you come to think of it. But I

dare say it never seemed so to him, and neither did it to me."

Cicely was utterly overpowered by this; her anger and impatience died out of her, and compunction and remorse rose in her heart. "That is not the right way to look at it," she said. "It is a shame that a man like you should only be a curate—oh, a shame to the Church and every one! Mr. Chester, who never was here, never did anything, what right had he to be the rector?—and this other person——" It was so necessary for poor Cicely in the disturbance of her mind to be angry with some one that naturally her wrath grew wild and bitter when she was free to pour it out upon strangers.

"Hush! hush! my dear," said the curate, with a half smile at her vehemence; for indeed he was deeply relieved to have the tide of indignation turned away from himself.

"Why should I hush, papa? It is your own college, you say; but they never take the trouble to ask who is at Brentburn, who has been taking the duty, who has looked after the people when the rector has been so long away. When people have the patronage of a parish in their hands, ought they not to know about it? And how did they dare, how did they venture, to give it to anybody but you?"

"You don't understand," said Mr. St. John. "The livings are given to the Fellows, Cicely, to people who have distinguished themselves. The dons have no right to alienate a living, as it were, to put it away from those who have a right to it, and give it to one like me."

"What have they distinguished themselves in, papa? In Latin and Greek—which will do a great deal in the parish, don't you think? whereas you have distinguished yourself in Brentburn——"

"I have not done very much, my dear," said the curate, shaking his head.

"You have done all that has been done, papa; what are those college people worth? This fine gentleman!" cried Cicily, with scorn. (I wonder poor Mildmay did not feel himself shrink even within his four pillars and moreen curtains.) "He knows about art if you please, and shudders at the sight of Mr. Chester's mahogany. Poor old things," the girl cried, turning round to look at the old bookcases with her eyes streaming, "I only know how fond I am of them now!"

I cannot tell how thankful her father was that the conversation had taken this turn. *He* too felt tenderly towards the old unlovely walls which had sheltered him so long, and in the circumstances he felt it no harm to speak a little more strongly than he felt. He looked round

upon the ghostly room, so dark in all its corners. "A great many things have happened to us here," he said; "this was the first room we sat in, your mother and I. What changes it has seen! I don't know how to make up my mind to leave it."

This brought back the girl to the original question. "But now," she said, drying her eyes, "there is no choice—we must leave it. I suppose that is what this Mr. Mildmay has really come about? He will give you some little time, I suppose. But papa, papa!" said Cicely, with a stamp of her foot to emphasize her words, "don't you see you *must* decide something—make up your mind to something? Hoping on till the last day will do no good to any one. And to think we should be so deep in debt! Oh, papa, what are we to do?"

"My dear, do not be hard upon me,"

said poor St. John; "I acknowledge, indeed, that it was my fault."

"It was not your fault—but I don't blame anybody. There was illness and weakness, and some people can and some people can't," said Cicely, with that mercy and toleration which are always, I fear, more or less, the offspring of contempt. "Let us not go back upon that—but, oh, tell me, what is to be done now?"

Mr. St. John shook his venerable head piteously. "What do you think, Cicely?" he said.

This was all she could get from him; and, oh, how glad he was when he was permitted to go to bed, and be done with it! He could not tell what to do—anything he had ever done had been done for him (if it is not a bull to say so), and he had no more idea what independent step to take in this emergency, than one

of the little boys had, to whose room he paid a half-surreptitious visit on his way to his own. Poor little souls! they were surreptitious altogether; even their father felt they had no right to be there in his daughters' way. He went in, shading his candle with his hand, not to disturb the slumbers of Annie, the little nurse-maid, and approached the two little cots on tip-toe, and looked at the two little white faces on the pillows. "Poor little things," he said to himself. Miss Brown was well out of it; she had escaped all this trouble, and could not be called to account, either for the babies, or those debts, which thus rose up against her in judgment. A dim giddiness of despair had made Mr. St. John's head swim while his daughter was questioning him; but now that the pressure was removed he was relieved. He sighed softly as he left the subject altogether, and said his

prayers, and slept soundly enough. Neither the debts nor the babies weighed upon him—at least "no more than reason;" he was quite able to sleep and to forget.

When Mr. Mildmay came downstairs next morning, and looked in at the open door of the dining-room, he saw Cicely "laying the cloth" there, putting down the white cups and saucers, and preparing the breakfast-table with her own hands. He was so much surprised at this, that he withdrew hastily, before she perceived him, with an uneasy sense that she might not like to be caught in such an occupation, and went to the garden, where, however, he could still see her through the open windows. He was not used to anything of the kind, and it surprised him much. But when he got outside he began to reflect, why should she be ashamed of it? There

was nothing in the action that was not graceful or seemly. He saw her moving about, arranging one thing after another, and the sight made somehow a revolution in his mind. He had been in the habit of thinking it rather dreadful, that a man should expose his wife—a lady—to be debased into such ignoble offices, or that any gentlewoman should have such things to do. This was the first time he had ever seen domestic business of a homely kind done by a lady, and my *dilettante* was utterly annoyed at himself, when he found that, instead of being hurt and wounded by the sight, he liked it! Terrible confession! He went up and down the garden walks, pretending to himself that he was enjoying the fresh air of the morning, but actually peeping, spying, at the windows, watching Miss St. John arrange the breakfast. She had not seen him, but, quite uncon-

scious of observation, absorbed in her own thoughts, she went on with her occupation. There were more things to do than to put the table to rights, for Betsy's work was manifold, and did not admit of very careful housemaid work. Mr. Mildmay watched her for some time, coming and going; and then he became aware of another little scene which was going on still nearer to himself. Out from a side door came the two little boys, hand in hand, with their hats tied on, and overshadowing the little pallid faces like two mushrooms. They were followed out by their little nurse, who watched their decorous exit with approval. "Now take your walk, till I come and fetch you," said this small guardian; upon which the two little urchins, tottering, but solemn, began a serious promenade, so far along the gravel walk, so far back again, turning at each end as on an

imaginary quarterdeck. The little boys tottered now and then, but recovered themselves, and went on steadily up and down, backward and forward, without a break. Mildmay was fond of children (so long as they did not bore him), and he was more amused than he could say. He made a few steps across the lawn to meet them, and held out his hands. "Come along here," he said; "come on the grass." The solemn babies paused and looked at him, but were not to be beguiled from their steady promenade. Their portentous gravity amazed him—even the children were mysterious in this romantic rectory. He went up to meet them on their next turn.

"Come, little ones," he said, "let us be friends. What are your names?"

They stood and looked at him with their big blue eyes, holding fast by each other. They were unprepared for this

emergency, as their father was unprepared for the bigger emergency in which he found himself. At last one small piping voice responded "Harry!" the other instinctively began to suck his thumb.

"Harry—and what else?—come, tell me," said the new rector; "you are not both Harry." He stood looking at them, and they stood and looked at him; and the two babies, three years old, understood as much about that quintessence of Oxford, and education and culture, as he did of them; they gazed at him with their four blue eyes exactly in a row. "Come, speak," he said, laughing; "you have lost your tongues." This reproach roused Charlie, who took his thumb out of his mouth and put his whole hand in, to search for the tongue which was not lost.

The sound of Mildmay's voice roused Cicely. She came to the window, and

looking out saw him there, standing in front of the children. Many schemes had been throbbing in her head all night. She had not slept tranquilly, like her father. She had been pondering plans till her brain felt like a honeycomb, each cell holding some active notion. She paused a moment, all the pulses in her beginning to throb, and looked out upon the opportunity before her. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she put down the little brush she held in her hand, threw up the window a little higher and stepped out—to try one other throw, though the game seemed played out, with Fortune and Fate!

END OF VOL. I.

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